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COVER 1/20
DOOM (1993)



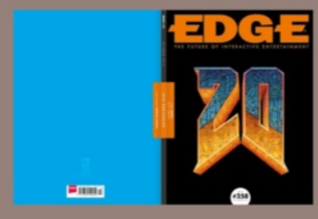


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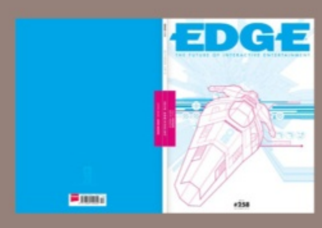

18
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PS3

XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE



1. *Doom* (1993)
Morgan Gibbons


2. *Ridge Racer* (1994)
Jamie Souk


3. *Wipeout* (1995)
John Machin

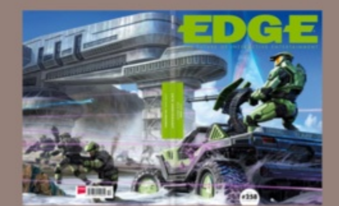

4. *Super Mario 64* (1996)
Marinko Milosevski


5. *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)
Jesse Keisala


6. *Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* (1998)
Wil Overton


7. *Shenmue* (1999)
Dennis Hind


8. *Deus Ex* (2000)
Yohann Schepacz & Martin Dubeau


9. *Halo* (2001)
343 Industries


10. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002)
Craig Stevenson


11. *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* (2003)
David Giraud


12. *Half-Life 2* (2004)
Walter Newton


13. *Resident Evil 4* (2005)
Army Of Trolls


14. *Wii Sports* (2006)
Andrew Hind


15. *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007)
Terry Stokes


16. *LittleBigPlanet* (2008)
Media Molecule


17. *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (2009)
Shaddy Safadi


18. *Red Dead Redemption* (2010)
Marsh Davies



19. *Minecraft* (2011)
Junkboy & Owen Hill


20. *Fez* (2012)
Phil Fish

Just for a change, let's talk about Edge's score

Twenty covers, then, to celebrate the games we've chosen as the ones that have defined the 20 years that have passed since **Edge**'s launch in 1993. Some have been designed by illustrators whose work has appeared in **Edge** before, some are the work of artists new to these pages, and others have been created for our anniversary edition by game developers, from Mojang to Media Molecule. The collection comprises a variety of styles, reflecting the variety across our chosen games, but every one references the number 20, explicitly or otherwise.

Beyond specific titles, what are the most important developments in gaming from the past 20 years? A selection of industry names offer their opinions in Knowledge. How about hardware? Out of the countless consoles that have made the **Edge** office their home since 1993, which are the best? Our top ten countdown has the answers.

We also look back over the years in interviews with three veteran industry leaders. One hails from the US, another from Japan, the third from the UK. Each has a distinct area of expertise, but all share a rare kind of dedication to the art of game creation even now, with a collective 80 years of industry experience behind them.

Elsewhere, we look forward to what the next two decades in gaming may hold, while Steve Jarratt explains the origins of **Edge**, revealing the difficulties that once surrounded the creation of just a single cover. And finally, in The Ten Amendments, we gather an elite band of games that should've received full marks when we reviewed them the first time around. Yes, *GoldenEye 007* is now, at last, an **Edge** 10. It's official.

Once you've digested our picks from the past, it's your turn: we want to know what you think are the best games of the past 20 years. Visit tinyurl.com/edge20 to take part – and possibly land an exclusive set of all 20 anniversary editions in the accompanying competition.

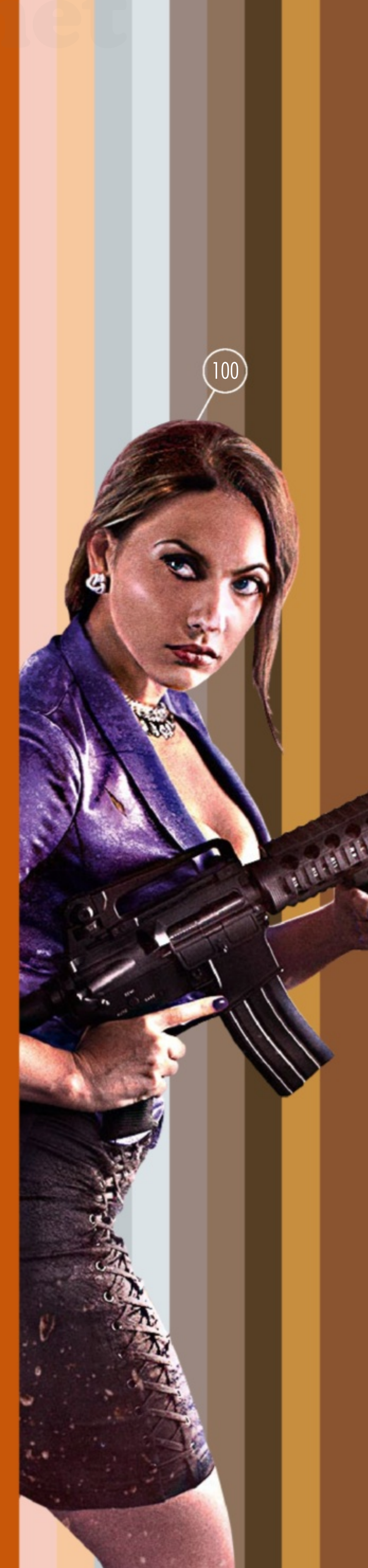


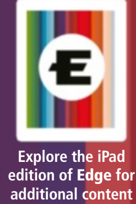
games



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EDGE

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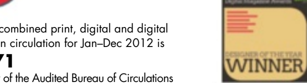


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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

The gaming landscape of today would be almost unrecognisable to an observer from 1993. For our 20th anniversary, we ask luminaries from across the industry (1) to pick the developments that have effected the most change since issue one of **Edge** (see p12). Then, in the first of our forward-looking stories, Ubisoft Montpellier's Michel Ancel explains on p16 how the unique tools built to make *Rayman Legends* (2) will make next-generation development of blockbuster games manageable with even the smallest teams. Twenty years from now Leap Motion (3) might not be definitive, but by the year's end the new desktop motion controller will be sitting in front of tens of thousands of computers and embedded notebooks, even if our review on p18 suggests that developers' enthusiasm is premature. The extreme side of next-generation development is on p20, as Eden Games and Ubisoft Reflections throw major manpower and money at *The Crew* (4) to replicate an entire nation in a game. London developer UsTwo turns graphic design into level design for iOS puzzle-platformer *Monument Valley* (5) on p22, and in Soundbytes on p24 American game designer Jesse Schell (6) identifies what he believes is a common mistake made by Sony and Microsoft. Finally, in My Favourite Game on p26 actress, comedian and author Aisha Tyler (7) talks *Fallout, The Walking Dead* and her fear of *Skyrim.*



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Up-to-the-minute game news and views



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Twenty years of innovation

The videogame landscape has gone through a series of upheavals since **Edge** launched in 1993. For our 20th anniversary special issue, we sought out leading minds in the videogame industry to pose the question: what would you identify as **the most influential game-related development** of the past 20 years?

David Braben Founder and CEO, Frontier Developments

"Since August 1993 and the first issue of **Edge**, the game industry has changed dramatically. Most especially it has moved from being an unfashionable minority sideline to truly mainstream. There were quite a few factors that fed into this, but probably the biggest single thing was **the launch of the first PlayStation** in late 1994 (early 1995 in the west). Sony brought a glitzy respectability to games. They had a strong brand and this made the mainstream media sit up and watch. There were social changes too: the subsequent decline in violent crime in the US (40 per cent from 1995–2000) was attributed by some to the rise of PlayStation, because of the reduction in delinquent teenagers on the streets.

"The games market appeared to have plateaued in 1994, but the launch of PlayStation kicked off the amazing double-digit percentage industry growth that has continued ever since, growing from around $5 billion then to the $78.5 billion it is now. This too was as a result of this respectability. Most importantly, it made the games better. It brought a professionalism to the industry and the games became richer as a result. We are all better for it, but we shouldn't forget that Sony took a big gamble, and it paid off for all of us. Now we can proudly say that we are gamers."



Sid Meier Director of creative development, Firaxis Game

"It's the speed of interaction with our players. When *Civ* originally came out there was no Internet – three months after release, we'd get letters that said 'I liked your game – here's what I'd do next'. It took months for us to get feedback and respond to it. We couldn't patch, really – you'd have to save up ideas for the next iteration of the game. Now we get feedback very quickly and we can turn around change very quickly – there's a much richer sense of interaction between designers and community. That has all evolved around **the Internet**. Dan Bunten was a visionary when he thought back in 1983 that two or three people could play *MULE* together. Today [the Internet has enabled] massively multiplayer games where thousands are in the same world: that's an amazing evolution. Also, the ability for games to be dynamic, to constantly evolve… these are the most significant changes."

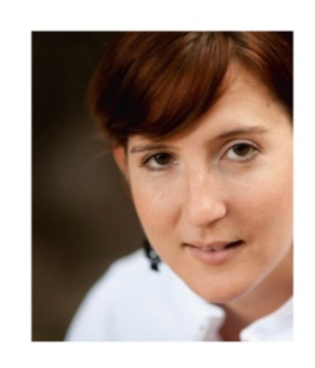


Hidetaka Suehiro (aka Swery65)
Director and producer, Access Games

"Maybe this is a well-worn answer, but I identify the most important game-related development of the past 20 years to be the **expanding videogame userbase**. In Japan, arcades grew and gave root to home consoles. This let PCs and consoles became the trunk of the industry, branching out into handhelds, cloud [gaming] and so forth. The market has been developing and expanding without any stops over 20 years. Various ideas and technologies have been developed, and the power to express ourselves has been enhanced. Because there is a market that accepts these expressions, a more diverse range of technologies, ideas and expression are developed. [The] concept of values becomes more multifaceted, expressions become more sophisticated, and entertainment, art and culture fuse together. Since there is a cycle like that, videogame creators like me get a chance to make a living and interact with variety of people. I say again: for me, the most important development is the expanding userbase of videogames. Without new users, there is no reason to keep creating videogames."

Kellee Santiago Developer relations, Ouya

"The **App Store** blew up the conventional notions of how people were allowed to make and distribute games to paying players. Enabling anyone to create any kind of interactive experience was the tipping point of making going indie a viable career option for a game developer, as opposed to figuring out what terrible corporation they were going to have to serve time in before they got enough experience to raise money and make games on their own. The indie development wave had begun, but the App Store made it a part of pop culture. And the fact that it lived on what became one of the most popular mobile phones on the market also tore down walls between gamers and non-gamers. It invited anyone to play, and so everyone did."

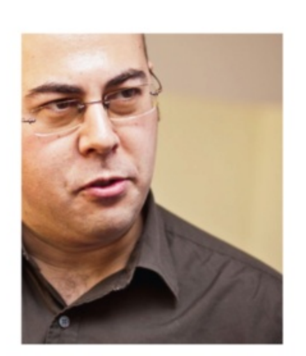


Tom Hall Senior creative director, PlayFirst

"I had a few answers, but the main difference between then and now is **the rise of the casual game**. An arguable first breaking of the casual ceiling was more than 20 years ago, with *Tetris* on the Game Boy – but with *Bejeweled, Peggle, Bookworm, Diner Dash,* the Wii, the iPhone, *Angry Birds* and so forth, we're finally in a market where more than niche, nerdy core players play games. There are people making and playing games who actually interact well with other humans! And there are growing numbers of women making games; there should be more. After the next 20 years, that won't even be [an issue]. Ping me then to talk about the new brain-jack thought-games."

Greg Kasavin Creative director, Supergiant Games

"I'd make a case for **digital distribution**. From *Doom* in 1993 to the rise of indie developers to today's day-and-date digital launches for triple-A games, I think digital distribution has transformed gaming and made it more accessible. I guess 'the Internet' is an even broader way of saying the same thing, but digital distribution is a more specific way in which the Internet has directly influenced all kinds of games. As the economy sagged and large studios started shutting down, smaller studios filled the void, thanks to the viability of digital distribution – arguably leading to a sort of renaissance for smaller, more personal games. For someone like me who's been playing games for a while, it almost feels like it's back to the '80s or early '90s when an individual or group of friends could make something really fascinating. Except now those games can reach so many more people so much faster."





Adrian Chmielarz Co-founder, The Astronauts

"The **appearance of notgames**. Everything else was expected: yes, games look better, play better, and are distributed in new ways (although digital distribution was my close second choice). But most games we play today are the same games we played 30 years ago. Which is great, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with the fact that, say, books or movies today are just cosmetically upgraded versions of what we have already experienced a century ago. But notgames, such as *Journey* or *Dear Esther*, have basically opened up a whole new world for us. We did not exactly think about games this way before. The philosophy that games are not just about challenge radiates on core games as well, and you can see the results in amazing experiences like *The Last Of Us*. I can't wait to see where we will take this in the next few years."



Keiji Inafune
CEO and conceptor, Comcept

"Over the last 20 years, the game industry has continued to change at a rapid pace. In particular, hardware specs have evolved constantly. And to someone who has seen it all, the biggest deal was **the introduction of the smartphone**. In terms of pure spec, it represented a moment of throwback or degeneration in the evolution of hardware. For a creator, improvements in hardware allow us to add more detail, while a devolution in hardware imposes limitations. Further, it means we have to make development budgets more compact as well. For example, it's like asking someone in the building trade who had, until now, been making houses at ¥100 million to instead make them for ¥2 million. Most of them would be unable to do that, right? Any creator who can hear the modern-day cry of 'make something – and with a lower budget!' and respond to this major change is a true creator. As a top runner in the game industry, with a pride that has maintained a sprint through 20 years, I will do my best!"



Brian Fargo Founder, Interplay Entertainment

"I can't imagine there being any greater impact to our industry than that of **the Internet**. It's quite difficult to list all the ways this cyber network has affected our business from a development, distribution and consumer perspective. My early memories of its impact were with the simple shareware model, which gave consumers an opportunity to try a game before they bought it, and this concept helped smaller companies like Epic and id to flourish. Our first game that really made playing over the Internet a key selling point was *Descent* in the mid-'90s. After that, things really seemed to explode as gaming saw the big MMORPGs come online and further gave an opportunity for smaller devs to show off their work with browser-based games. Without the Internet we wouldn't have Xbox Live, voice chat, cloud computing and so forth."

Tim Willits Studio director, id Software



"From the very first game mods to the genesis of triple-A games, **user-generated content** has had a profound impact on our industry. From people like myself, getting their start making simple levels for their favourite games, to mod teams who had the ideas for mega-hits such as *Portal*, *Counter-Strike* and *Dota*, user-generated content has launched the careers of some of our brightest and best developers. These same developers are now the people who are shaping and steering the entire industry. One of the best things about user-generated content is that it is made by gamers for gamers with very little concern for monetary reward. Most mod makers do it for the pure enjoyment of creating something unique and sharing it freely."

Christofer Sundberg Founder & chief creative officer, Avalanche Studios

"The most obvious response is **the Internet**. It's also a very boring response and I wish I could [say] something less obvious, but the Internet really changed everything. MMOGs could connect thousands of players in massive online worlds, and that really changed things for everyone. The downside of the Internet was piracy, and how it affected the ways publishers look at game development and DRM solutions – that has had a negative impact. Online experiences and connecting players is more important now than ever before. Do we really want to connect players who don't want to be connected, even if it's a part of the gaming experience? Is this a choice for us to make and just ask our players to accept it, or should we offer it as a choice?

"I personally don't play games online. I want to use the Internet in a way that feels natural to our fans and, until I've figured that out, I'll keep playing offline."

Toshihiro Nagoshi Chief creative officer, Sega Corporation



"The major turning point in the game industry will surely turn out to be **the rise of mobile gaming**. Games started out as a way to kill time through play and then evolved into the desire to play something deeper. But the rise in mobile gaming tells us games have returned to their point of origin – of killing time through play. Since mobile phones have garnered the largest installed base of any platform around the world, this evolution continues to grow, along with that buzzword 'social'. I think this is the biggest event of the past 20 years, and one that keeps expanding even today."



Ian Bogost
Founding partner, Persuasive Games

"Let's start by excluding some of the obvious choices as too obvious. In the 1990s, *Doom* established a paradigm that remains dominant today. Soon after, that playstyle relied on 3D accelerated graphics cards, another possible candidate. In the last decade, Facebook and the iPhone are responsible for more players than any other platform. 'Importance' is such an abstract concept: it's hard to pin down what it even means, let alone name a single specimen of greatest importance. When it comes to importance, significance and influence seem like close cousins – and significance and influence are most significant and most influential when we can't see them. **Solitaire** came bundled with Windows since version 3.0 in 1990, but the OS didn't catch on in homes and businesses until Windows 3.1 two years later. It was intended to teach novices how to use a mouse and the interface in an unthreatening way. It was bundled with every version until Windows 8, creating hundreds of millions of players. An accessible activity, easy to play – this is *Solitaire*'s legacy. A videogame as a normal activity, one so ordinary it's not even worth talking about."



Harvey Smith Creative director, Arkane Studios

"It's still underway, but by far the most important development in the last two decades is the **elevation of meaningfulness** as a critical value. Videogames have transitioned from interactive artefacts for entertainment, diversion and commerce to experiential things that disappoint us if they don't speak to us at a deeper level. In the old days, we got glimpses of what was possible. We'd find ourselves caring for a game avatar, like the *X-COM* squadmates with the same randomly generated last names, whom we perceived as spouses and therefore could not be allowed to die during a mission. Once we'd tasted those things and discerned that the medium could offer more meaningful experiences, we began to chase it with singular focus."



Yves Guillemot Co-founder and CEO, Ubisoft



"For me, the most important game-related developments are those that have greatly enhanced the role of the player as an active participant. There are now many more possibilities for players to **add their own content** to a game or to express their own style in terms of personalisation and interactions with other gamers. Look at games such as *Minecraft* and *Trials* – they've changed what it means to 'play' a game by giving players the means to become creators and interact with a wider community of players. Ultimately, these developments mean players can achieve great things – on their own, together within the game community, and even in real life as well."

Sean Murray Managing director, Hello Games

"I don't think Apple aimed to shake up the game industry when it set out to make **iOS**, but it did… and because of iOS, game development has completely changed for the better. The first time I held an iPhone, I was amazed. I couldn't believe a touchscreen could feel so responsive. Like every other developer, I couldn't help thinking of new games that could work on this sleek, minimalist machine. When the App Store came along, those ideas started getting released. Developers had the stable form factor of a console mixed with the openness of a PC, existing in the pockets of 200 million people. Since 2008 the App Store has generated $10 billion in revenue for developers – $5 billion last year alone. I think iOS has changed games in ways we can't even imagine, in ways that won't become obvious until the generation that is now growing up with a touchscreen in its hands from birth starts making games of its own."

Brenda Romero Co-founder, Loot Drop



"Looking back over the last 20 years, nothing else even comes close to [the impact of] **the Internet** for me. Broadband connectivity has changed everything, from how we get games to how we play them to how we make them. Looking back, I think about the beginning of the *Wizardry* series that I worked on in 1981. Computers allowed us to take it from pencil and paper to machine. The Internet allowed for multiplayer, distribution, and ultimately MMOGs and MOBAs. There is literally no facet of my job that has been untouched by it. Even my analogue games benefit. Much of my research is digital and most people know about them because they've streamed one of my GDC talks – something I suspect they would not have done if they had been crawling along at 9600 baud."



Seth Killian
Lead game designer,
Sony Santa Monica

"The answer simply must be **the Internet**. Online multiplayer gives us endless new playmates. Every one of them represents an opportunity to be entertained, and each validates and deepens our potential experience. They make our games come to life in a way no AI ever has, and demand that designers produce experiences that can survive millions of plays and become richer in the process. We cooperate, compete and discover one another. There's a peculiar intimacy that arises even from brutal multiplayer experiences, and when a game can reflect unique aspects of a person through their play, that's a true height of the medium. Even with singleplayer games, the Internet is where we share our passion, meet fellow travellers, and discover our next adventure. It's the perfect complement to an art that was born digital. Finally, the viability of digital distribution has opened the doors to new voices in a beautiful way. Original, and sometimes highly personal, takes on gaming from the indie space have captured our imagination, and the new distribution channels have given these pioneers hope that their unusual games may find an audience, or even commercial success. God bless them all."

Intelligent design

How AI-driven development has readied Ubisoft Montpellier for the next generation

Ubisoft Montpellier is working on an answer to the colossal budgets, teams and studio spaces that characterise modern game development. The publisher's smallest self-contained team gambled on *Beyond Good & Evil*, turned a quick movie cash-in into a passion project with *King Kong*, and most recently released 2D platformer *Rayman Origins* at retail and sold enough copies to make a sequel. Montpellier's budgets are slim, its team is tiny and the studio is a house on a hill, but with *Rayman* the studio has built a foundation upon which bigger, broader games will be made.

"Compared to *Assassin's Creed* [the team is] pretty small," studio head **Michel Ancel** says. "Of course, when you work with a small team, the big advantage is that the potential of everyone can be seen in a very direct way, as long as your way of making the game is very flexible. So that's really the key – if you don't have this flexibility, you could lose the potential of everyone in the team."

"Now that Rayman Legends has been finished, we are going to move back onto triple-A games"

UbiArt Framework was Montpellier's first step in producing an art-intensive game with flexibility and speed. All an artist needs is a silhouette, and an animator can have it moving in-engine within minutes. "I think UbiArt, when you see it the first time, is really amazing," *Rayman Legends*' lead game designer **Emile Morel** says. "You don't even have to pause the level. You can put an object or an enemy where you want, even while you're playing. It gives you the opportunity to try new things and do things very fast and improve all the time. All these elements make the iteration process very fast and easy to use."

Originally developed for 2010's *Rayman Origins* and part-funded by the French government for its contribution to the arts, UbiArt Framework was the result of years of research and development. A trip to New Zealand's Weta Digital, responsible for the visual effects on Avatar and The Hobbit, helped. "We visited the studios in New Zealand," Ancel recalls. "We discovered they were working closely with the programmers in order to avoid too much repetitive work done by humans. I think it's very interesting to see how much you can integrate and put artificial intelligence in the tools so you can really order the computer to do things. It's a very interesting way of working, to see where and how humans are involved in creation [and where the computer takes over]."

Could these methods of production for a 2D game carry over into 3D? More tantalisingly, could they carry over into Ancel's long-awaited labour of love, *Beyond Good & Evil 2*? "Of course," Ancel says. "There's not so much difference between the two because, as soon as you start the process of sharing human [development] with the computer, you can translate that to more complex games. We have done research and it's something we are working on, but I can't mention too much about that."

Offloading work to UbiArt in order to save on manpower is efficient and cost-effective. Better still, it frees the studio's artists and designers to work on the parts demanding a human touch – art, level design, audio – while the computer's logic is committed to UV mapping, dynamic lighting, collision detection and so on. The engine intelligently couples an 'invisible wall' to the level's parameters to handle collision detection without ever being touched by a designer. A small change to level geometry in other games can create a cascade of problems; in UbiArt's system, geometry and collision detection are one and the same.





Michel Ancel, studio head (top), and Emile Morel, lead game designer



Those techniques, Ancel says, will carry over to large-scale open-world games such as *Beyond Good & Evil 2*. "For sure, we're doing research that could help even for bigger games," he says. "We believe we can achieve big games even with this size [of studio]; more could be done by the computer and we can focus on the really important things done by real people.

"The content and the quality of the content will be different. That's something we've learned with our tools on *Rayman Legends*; in fact, those tools improve the quality. It was also funny to see how many people in the team can create content with the tools. Sometimes in [this business] you say, 'Oh, this veteran is better than this young guy,' but what if the veteran is only better at the technical things? When those two people are using tools that are easy to use, technical things don't matter; it's more the imagination and ideas that are very important. But we need to practise and use the tools, and now that *Rayman Legends* has been finished, we are going to move back onto triple-A games with those tools. I think it could be very interesting to talk about it in a year, and to see how far we've come." ■

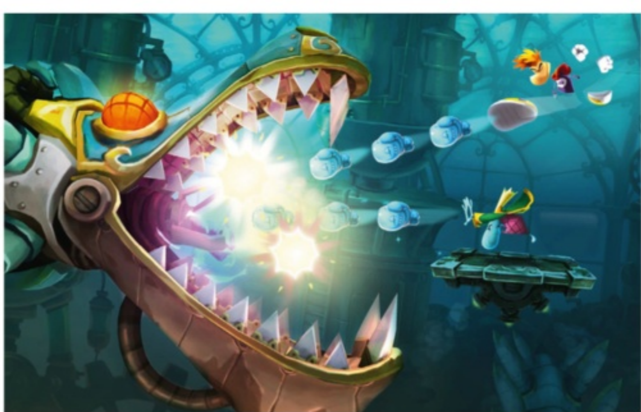


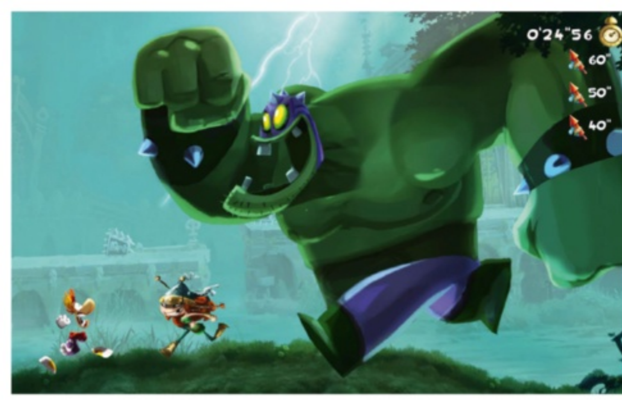


Rayman's revival has been a huge success for Ubisoft, making him one of the few '90s mascots with real staying power



UbiArt can animate any shape, but Rayman still sports the disembodied hands and legs that made him so easy to animate in the old-fashioned way





A simple wire skeleton is drawn on top of the artist's drawings, and hinged joints are used to animate even the largest objects without painstaking frame-by-frame animation



VILLA PEOPLE

Ancel and Morel's colleagues talk working conditions

Ubisoft Montepellier's work environment seems to bring out the best in its team. What makes it so special? "Lots of French wine and relaxation after a day's work," says level designer **Chris McEntee**. "We do a lot of things after work as a team, which allow us to bond with each other." For lead level designer **Julien Chevallier** it's communication: "People have to listen to each other. If people are having fun creating a game there are better odds that the game will be fun, too." Technical director of art **Benjamin Mouret** attributes it to attire: "The dress code is flip-flops and shorts, and the sea is only ten minutes from the office."

Invisible touch

Leap Motion brings 3D motion control to the desktop with mixed results

At first, Leap Motion's device feels like magic. An invisible cone of light tracks your fingers in front of your monitor and turns every gesture into onscreen action across Leap's selection of independent games and apps – and, like every motion controller, it feels unique and exciting right up to the moment you break the spell with your own curiosity.

It's players' own faults, really. You watch your family enjoying *Wii Sports* with exaggerated serving motions, dipping a knee to bowl and swinging for the bleachers, and you ask yourself: "Just how little do I need to swing the controller to get the same effect?" The answer is, of course, not much – the Wii Remote's sensitivity was never a match for the games it was sold upon, and a simple flick of the wrist was ample to launch a *Wii Sports* baseball out of the stadium. Kinect, too, was magic right up until the moment you found that placing one arm behind your back sent your character flailing, or that turning sideways gave you a double-jointed knee.

Leap Motion's $80 controller, with which the company shares its name, is a tiny device that fills the space in front of your monitor with infrared light and tracks every motion within its area of effect. It looks innocuous on a desk and is easily set up, with the drivers and Airspace application downloaded from Leap's site. It ships in a neat little square box, has two USB cables – one long, one short, to accommodate different setups – and salutes Apple's design aesthetic with its brushed aluminium and glossy black shell.

A tutorial and selection of demos are Leap Motion's first magic trick. As you swipe your fingers through the air you'll trace glowing lines on the screen, drawing shapes and pictures with a finger. Another demo tracks the orientation of your hands with an onscreen skeleton, each wireframe finger mirroring your own instantly as you move it. But when curiosity gets the better of you and you turn your hand sideways, you lose three of your skeletal fingers.

"Like every motion controller, it feels exciting right up to the moment you break the spell with your own curiosity"

Leap Motion's two-dimensional view of the world limits the readability of your gestures and means a sideways hand is as good as a one-fingered hand. Test the depth of the cone and you'll find that you're often dipping your hands in and out of the light without realising; there's a learning process with Leap Motion's device, and the software does little to assist your understanding of the gestural language you're forced to learn.

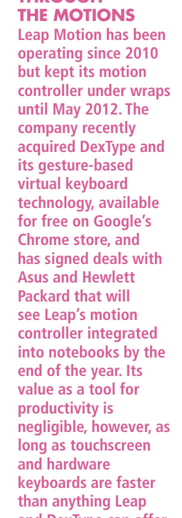
The controller can be configured to operate your mouse pointer, which is almost marginally desirable for Windows 8's touch-friendly interface, but Leap Motion's cone of light is not a touchscreen with a binary on/off understanding of your intentions. You'll 'press' invisible buttons by reaching into space and jabbing at air, scroll pages with a swipe of two fingers – and switch back to the immediacy and accuracy of a mouse within minutes.

It's as a game controller that Leap Motion is at its most worthwhile, but even games built for the hardware very quickly reveal problems that are beyond the device's ability to solve. Double Fine's *Dropchord* is the showcase game – the *Halo* of Leap Motion, in a sense – but it's



Airspace Home manages Leap Motion apps, but the Airspace Store pops up in a browser instead





THROUGH THE MOTIONS
Leap Motion has been operating since 2010 but kept its motion controller under wraps until May 2012. The company recently acquired DexType and its gesture-based virtual keyboard technology, available for free on Google's Chrome store, and has signed deals with Asus and Hewlett Packard that will see Leap's motion controller integrated into notebooks by the end of the year. Its value as a tool for productivity is negligible, however, as long as touchscreen and hardware keyboards are faster than anything Leap and DexType can offer.





DROPCHORD

Publisher Double Fine **Price** Free

Free for now, the standout game on the Airspace Store is the clearest demonstration of Leap Motion's strengths and weaknesses. *Dropchord* has you dragging a line across icons, triggering musical notes and sweeping a path around obstacles while lactic acid burns your frozen, aching shoulders. Despite such issues, it's the best example of Leap's precision.



FRUIT NINJA

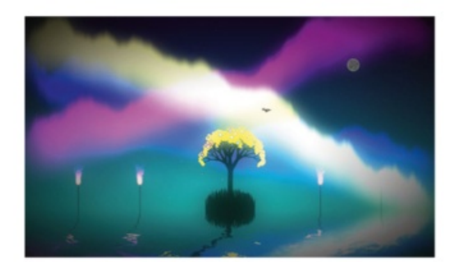
Publisher Halfbrick **Price** $3.59

Fruit Ninja seems immediately suited to Leap's motion controls but the visible onscreen cursor rather gives the game away. Its fruit-slicing mechanic makes the game an obvious choice for a motion-controlled port, but it's also perfectly playable without a Leap Motion sensor. The 360 version does a better job of hiding the artifice behind the gesture-based controls.

SUGAR RUSH

Publisher Disney **Price** $2.39

It looked like Disney had skipped the opportunity to release its own kart racer based on the *Sugar Rush* game from Wreck-It Ralph, but here it is, late enough and horrible enough for absolutely nobody to care. It's a slow, clumsy effort with stodgy physics and the invisible steering wheel controls that didn't work for *Kinect Joy Ride* – and still don't work here.



KYOTO

Publisher Funktronic Labs **Price** Free

A ten-minute audioreactive puzzle game that would be Leap Motion's best tech demo if only the gestures it requires were accurately recognised. *Kyoto* sees you farming stars, strumming Northern Lights, and exploring a simple space with your hands – and does a better job of encouraging players to experiment than anything from Leap's own training apps.





POPPOP!

Publisher Pixel Potato **Price**$3.59

The Airspace Store's lineup is reminiscent of the early days of the iOS store, with tech demos extended to full games and countless developers thrilled by control gimmicks. *PopPop!* is a simple shooting gallery game with pinch-to-shoot controls that, if nothing else, demonstrate a better way to emulate pointing and clicking with a mouse than Leap Motion's own solution.



SERIOUS SLICE

Publisher Curious Bit **Price**$3.59

A bizarre port of iOS title *Perfect Slice*, with objects torn from the *Serious Sam* universe. Each item must be bisected as close to 50/50 as you can – easy when it's a simple pyramid, harder when it's a butt-heavy assault rifle, and utterly inexplicable in either case. It's perfectly playable without motion controls, and is one of the best games on the Airspace Store.

telling just how much easier the game is on iOS. With fingers planted firmly on the screen and the game's two 'handles' responding to every motion, it's an unusual and solid rhythm-action game, but with arms outstretched you lose precision and control, particularly during sequences where you're required to 'press' buttons with one, two or three fingers.

And *Dropchord*'s lengthy sessions expose another quirk: sitting with arms outstretched is uncomfortable, even for physically fit players. A half-hour spent with hands hovering at chest height is a half-hour your shoulders will quickly notice, and there's a reason why doctors recommend that office workers sit straight, plant their feet and support their wrists on a table. Arms are heavy, and Leap Motion only underlines that.

In a way it's proof that a Minority Report future is undesirable; operating a computer with outstretched arms is unnatural and uncomfortable, and an alternative already exists that has worked better and more intuitively since the early '80s. Leap's brand of motion control offers little that a mouse or a touchscreen doesn't, and for now there are few apps to justify the three-dimensional depth the sensor allows. The question Leap Motion raises is whether desktop motion control was desirable in the first place. ■



Contrary to Leap's own recommendations, the controller works better placed to the right of your keyboard

Altered States

Ubisoft is turning its version of the American dream into reality with open-world racing game The Crew

Eden Games' *Test Drive Unlimited* provided a vast play area in its take on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Now Ivory Tower, a studio staffed by former members of the *TDU* team, wants to go further, offering up the whole of North America in *The Crew*.

Oahu may have been big, but *The Crew*'s world is more than four times that size. Squeezed into this distorted version of the US are 7,000 miles of road, 15 cities – six of which are comparable in size to Liberty City in *GTAIV* – and 15 million individual objects. It'll take you roughly an hour and half to drive from the East Coast to the West Coast, and four hours to circumnavigate the entire map. Where do you begin with a project of this scale?

"It starts off with a DEM [digital elevation model], which is an accurate representation of the country in terms of height," Ubisoft creative director **Julian Gerighty** explains. "Then we define ecosystems – which might represent a type of vegetation, a type of road, or a type of architectural structure – and these ecosystems are then placed, one next to the other, to create a variety of different experiences around the country."

It's as simple as that, then. A great deal of the heavy lifting is done by Ivory Tower's proprietary tools and Babel engine, which procedurally generate much of the variety in the ecosystems, and the results are then moulded by artists and designers.

"The whole world is generated multiple times per week over the nighttime period," Gerighty continues. "It takes about eight hours to render and regenerate the world, but it allows us to see the changes that we've made within this procedurally generated space on an almost daily basis."

Where Oahu had just one ecosystem in play, *The Crew*'s US will have at least 11. Gerighty highlights the team's ambition to keep the look of the game fresh and distinct throughout: drive for ten minutes in any direction, he promises, and you'll encounter a different ecosystem or new types of architecture. But one of the biggest challenges of building a version of North America, it turns out, isn't what goes in but what you leave out.

> "Ecosystems are placed, one next to the other, to create a variety of experiences round the country"

"It's a French team, and when we initially defined how the game was going to look and feel, everybody had their own idealised version in mind," Gerighty says. "The major cities were fairly easy to settle upon. Detroit, the birthplace of motor culture. Chicago, the home of the blues, and which is also very interesting architecturally. New York: you *can't* have the US without New York. Washington DC, Miami, the dream of driving down Sunset Boulevard in a classic car – those European and American fantasies of car culture, those are the things that really informed what we were going to create."

But it's not just the obvious choices that are represented. There will be dozens of smaller towns to discover, and areas like the Midwest with its expansive cornfields.

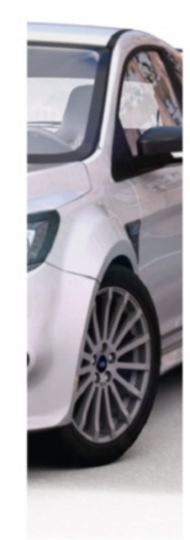
It sounds comprehensive, but surely with a play area this large there had to be some compromise? Route 66 might be great with the wind in your hair, but we doubt it would hold its appeal for couch-bound drivers holding the right trigger. "For me," Gerighty explains, "it's all about gameplay. Having the Brooklyn Bridge in New York is essential. Having the roads that cross through Central Park is essential. Having the structure of Manhattan *roughly* right is essential. But replicating every single road exactly absolutely is not.



Julian Gerighty, creative director

"There's enough space once you've captured the essence of a place to [create] a really fun outline road mapping. And then it's a choice of how we position the races, and the missions, within the game. The rest is open world, which is a great terrain for skills and instanced challenges, but less important for pure gameplay than the missions."

With the game not due until early 2014, the team still has time left to iterate, and Gerighty claims that the engine is capable of much more than we saw in the live E3 demo; Times Square by day, for example, will be significantly busier, and Gerighty admits that he'll be disappointed if the visuals aren't dialled up a notch or two by the time of release. As it stands, though, *The Crew* is already one of the most ambitious open-world projects to date: a vast, highly detailed world exposing itself to comparison with its real-life counterpart.



"*LA Noire* stunned me with the level of detail that they went into recreating 1940s LA," Gerighty says. "For us, though, the challenge came in finding a unique take for each ecosystem. It's all about coming at it with a specific emotion in mind that we want to create, or a specific colour palette we want to feature the most. It's that type of thing that really makes the experience stand out." ■



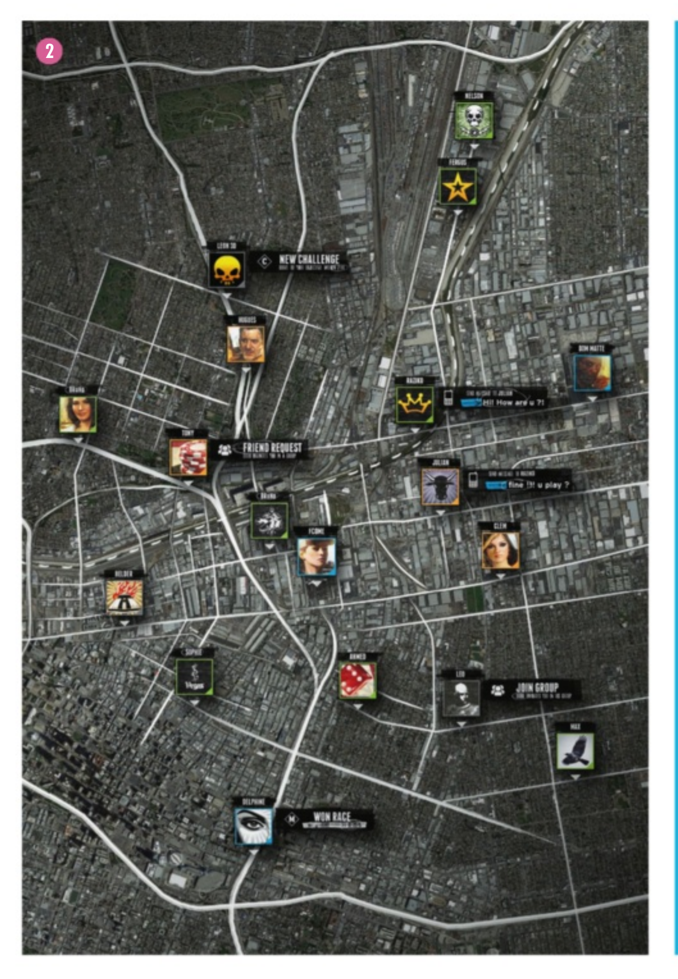
ROAD TRIP
1 Ivory Tower combined reference trips, satellite data and even Google Maps to create its United States. 2 Several of the game's cities are the size of Liberty City, with hundreds of miles of streets to explore. 3 Along with the street versions, your cars can also be customised in circuit, dirt and raid flavours. 4 Traffic isn't your only concern: street racing will attract the attention of the police. 5 Players can team up into 'crews' in order to take on co-operative missions and challenge each other in races





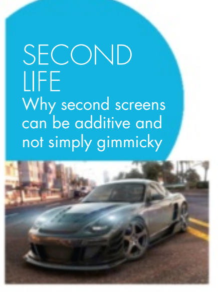






SECOND LIFE

Why second screens can be additive and not simply gimmicky



Despite the widespread scepticism levelled at the much-vaunted second-screen experience, developers' enthusiasm for the concept remains undiminished. At E3, Ubisoft made some of the strongest cases yet for such an approach with *The Division*'s drone and *The Crew*'s app, which is part map, part game. "I believe in being able to interact with my game, or check up on it, at any moment of the day," says Gerighty. "If I can have an app that accompanies me through my experience of a game – something like *Watch Dogs*, for example – then that's wonderful. If it helps me interact with it, even better. There are things we can do today that we couldn't do five years ago, and it would be a shame for us not to explore those."



CANNY VALLEY

UsTwo finds gameplay in graphic design

London design-agency-turned-game-developer UsTwo's follow-up to iOS hit *Whale Trail* is the visually distinctive puzzler *Monument Valley*. "We've found that when we design levels we need to be thinking about three goals at the same time," art director **Ken Wong** says. "Creating an interesting maze or puzzle, constructing a compelling piece of architecture to explore, and arranging it on screen like a work of graphic design. We're trying as much as possible to let the architecture tell the story and hint at what elements are interactive. We explored outwards by experimenting with different architectures from around the world, combining them with well-known visual tricks and paradoxes like forced perspective and the Penrose triangle."

Wong's other influences include the low-poly 3D work of Timothy Reynolds (www.turnislefthome.com), bonsai trees, poster design and MC Escher. "Escher found a way of using art to convey math and geometry and architecture to a wide audience," he says. "We'd be thrilled to achieve the same with *Monument Valley*." ■

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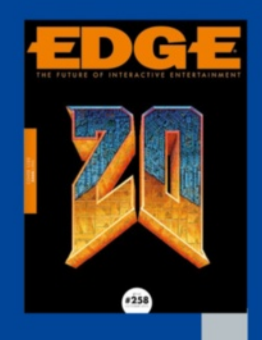
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I messed up in a big way… I felt like people were staring at me in the company cafeteria and saying, 'That's him! That's **the guy who ruined *Resident Evil 2.*'"**

Hideki Kamiya remembers some miserable lunchbreaks from his Capcom days



"Kinect is sort of like a zero-button mouse with a lot of latency on it."

John Carmack explains why he won't be your river-raft partner in *Kinect Adventures*



"I would love to [save them], but **it's not possible with my skill."**

Shigeru Miyamoto admits he probably shouldn't be left in charge of large groups of Pikmin

"Customers want you to stay the same, even if it drives you into the ground. Somehow, the mistake they all make is listening to their customers."

Jesse Schell on Xbox, PlayStation and the innovators' dilemma

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Border Break
Manufacturer Sega

Sega's most popular arcade game has been around for four years but has never reached home consoles or travelled beyond Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Now on revision 3.5, *Border Break* is a rudimentary and visually bland thirdperson shooter pitting two teams of ten Blast Runners against one another in simple arenas with simple objectives. It would struggle to distinguish itself without the array of gimmicks it would have to lose on the way to consoles or western arcades. The controller is a fixed stick with D-pad controller and mouse, communication is handled on a touchscreen, standard Japanese arcade infrastructure allows for online battles between teams at competing arcades, and a card system lets players earn upgrades and farm chips while offline.

Border Break's success is a strong case against the notion that Japanese players don't like shooters, online play or PC games, or perhaps it's just the case for Japan's willingness to stomach even an online team-based arena shooter with a mouse controller so long as the camera sits behind a mecha's shoulder rather than a walking lump of scar tissue. Either way, its success has spawned a new genre for Japan's arcades and Konami's newer challenger, *Steel Chronicle*, with *Virtual On*-style twin sticks, has recently overtaken *Border Break* in Japan's escalating robot wars.



My Favourite Game
Aisha Tyler

The actress, comedian and author on console shooters, feeling like John McClane, and the feminisation of games

When sceptical misogynists challenged **Aisha Tyler**'s credentials for hosting Ubisoft's E3 conference by asking what console she plays, her response was "motherfucker, all of them". Tyler has toured the US as a comedian, published a book of essays, starred in Friends, 24, Glee and Archer, and has discussed gaming on her own podcast enough to leave little doubt about where her interests lie when it comes to downtime.

How did gaming start out for you?
I started as an arcade gamer. As a kid, I played with my dad a lot. I played a lot of *Pac-Man*, but my first kind of really obsessive game was *Defender*. There was a *Defender* [cabinet] in the laundromat across the street from my house and I would go there every afternoon and play the crap out of it. So, yeah, early *Defender*… *Galaga*.

Did you get into PC gaming?
It was arcades through high school and then in college I started PC gaming – PC gaming in the sense that it was on a computer; I've always been a Mac user. So in college I played a lot of really rudimentary PC games like *Tetris* – that was a really big life-killer when I was at college, all the permutations of *Tetris* – *Leisure Suit Larry* and some of the early disk games. And then, after that, all of the *Myst* and *Riven* games, and then the early *Tomb Raider* games.

What do you play nowadays?
The big three for me are *Halo*, *Gears Of War* and *Fallout*. Those are probably my three most-played franchises. It's interesting, I mainly play shooters. I used to play multiplayer on *Halo* quite a bit and I played a lot of campaign on *Gears* and *Fallout* with my husband. We're in the middle of *BioShock Infinite* right now. I liked the first *BioShock*, but did *not* like the second one. I'm still avoiding *Skyrim* because I'm told it's going to eat my life and I can't afford something [like that]. I'll stay up till four in the morning just to play, so if a game is going to do that to me I tend to avoid it, which is awful because I'm sure *Skyrim* is amazing. We play a little bit of everything but I'm not a franchise obsessive or a platform obsessive. So I really just get into games that I like and I play them. I'm not like, "I only play this!"

TYLER THE CREATOR
Aisha Tyler started her career as a touring comedian in the mid-'90s, but is probably most recognisable to British TV viewers as Ross's girlfriend Charlie Wheeler in Friends. Recurring roles in CSI and 24 followed shortly thereafter, and frequent TV comedy and talk show appearances lined her up to replace Drew Carey as host on the American Whose Line Is It Anyway? Off-camera, Tyler published her first book, Swerve, in 2004 and second essay collection, titled Self-Inflicted Wounds, in July of this year. She also hosts the weekly Girl On Guy interview podcast.



"The big three are Halo, Gears Of War and Fallout. Those are probably my three most-played franchises"

Do you manage to play games much when you're away filming?
A few years ago Microsoft built me a custom travel case for my Xbox, which was really nice and accommodating. It's a hard case and weighs like a thousand pounds. But I don't travel with anything to game with now because I'm working 17-hour days and have no time. I don't do any [handhelds] but I do occasionally game on my iPad. So really basic games [such as] *Plants Vs Zombies*. *The Walking Dead* – that was incredible, really beautifully done. It goes to show that a complex story and great characters can more than compensate for rudimentary gameplay.

The games you've talked about so far are very 'blokey'. Does it bother you that games are still predominantly made by and for men?
Yes and no. I feel like my way into gaming was 'blokey'; I was raised by a single dad, so I always loved action movies and every kid who loves action movies imagines that they're John McClane. There are women who like shooters, and I don't feel female gaming is necessarily more 'huggy' than male gaming, but I also feel if *The Walking Dead* is the way games are going, then more women will want to game. If there's a 'feminisation' of games – and I don't think that's the right word, honestly – it'll benefit all gaming because *The Walking Dead* was so emotionally wrenching that everything about it was satisfying.

What's your favourite game of all time, and why?
Can I give two answers? *Halo* was my gateway, my first console game. I thought it was so beautiful, but they did the reboot a couple of years ago – they were showing the old and the new – and I remember thinking, "Oh my God, it looks like shit!" But I feel like, honestly, the whole *Myst*/*Riven* thing because it was my adult reintroduction to gaming. I hadn't been gaming for years and it was so beautiful and evocative and kind of a harbinger of where console gaming eventually went, [to] these beautiful dream-like worlds. That was when I woke back up to gaming as a grown-up. ■



Tyler's years spent playing games and her long absence from gaming can both be attributed to her father, who took her to arcades as a child but allowed no television at home during her teenage years

WEBSITE
Dream Cast Casino
http://saltybet.com
The Mugen fighting game engine has always been rich with potential, but has rarely produced much worth playing. Copy-pasting characters from myriad different sources is asking for trouble in a genre whose games live or die on their balance, after all. Salty Bet has embraced Mugen's inherent brokenness with Dream Cast Casino, a 24-hour stream that randomly selects two fighters from a library of over 1,300 and has their AI routines face off, with viewers betting on the outcome. Nowhere else can you see Akuma obliterated by a minivan drawn in MS Paint, or Tiger Woods' digitised face flatten a Ninja Turtle. And Ronald McDonald is, for our money, the best character in the game. Wonderful stuff, made more so by that rarest of things: a Twitch chat stream that's funny, not offensive.





VIDEO
Xbox One Unboxing
http://bit.ly/1cMOC0N
Unboxing videos are hard. Who knew? Certainly not Xbox's Major Nelson, Larry Hryb, who muddles his way through the first ever Xbox One unboxing, casually tossing manuals, leaflets and even entire Kinect modules aside as he digs deeper into the colossal black box. It's wildly unprofessional but curiously charming, and it throws up a challenge for the gaming blogs: Xbox One ships with a controller, headset, Kinect and – revealed exclusively by Major Nelson – a sticker in the box. How will Sony respond to Microsoft's killer scrap?

WEB GAME
Pretentious Game 3
http://bit.ly/1bIMuqg
The conclusion of a three-part tale starring coloured blocks, *Pretentious Game 3* has invited comparison with Mike Bithell's *Thomas Was Alone*, but any resemblance is purely coincidental and Bithell himself is full of praise for *PG3*. You guide a magenta cube to the grey love of her life, a task made tougher when both cubes respond to your inputs; move towards him and he'll walk away. It's a story of love, loss and hard choices over a series of levels in which you have to push your lover's wife (a pastel pink square) off the screen before you can be united with your beau. There are some smart breaches of the fourth wall, too, with story text used as platforms and one puzzle that can only be solved by clicking on Kongregate's menu overlay. What started as a joke ends in a game that's better than its name suggests.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

Some of the other things catching our attention during the production of **E**258

GAMING HEADSET
Monster EA MVP Carbon
Headphone guru Monster has teamed up with EA Sports to launch its first headset aimed squarely at the gaming market. The detachable microphone arm that snaps interchangeably into a jack beneath the left or right earcup speaks to the fact that this headset has no interest in being sequestered to your gaming corner. And when you hear the clarity and musculature of the sound pumping from the noise-isolating cups, which comfortably hug your ears instead of swallowing them earmuff-style, you'll want to hear all projected sound in your life through them. The only real drawback, aside from the lofty yet hard-earned pricetag, is the EA Sports logo on both sides of the unit, a garish design touch that suggests you're a rabid sports fan, whether you are or not. Fashion quibbles aside, this headset feels and sings like an absolute dream.



continue

Developing on Xbox One
Making every console a devkit: one big step forward

Edge babygrows
Office gift du jour or new revenue stream?

John Carmack moving to Oculus
Gaming's biggest brain and most exciting tech

PC game reviews
Download codes, one-button screenshots – next gen's already here

quit

Capturing on Xbox One
Xbox Live Gold only, 720p, 30fps: three steps back

MOBAs
The *LOL* beater is the new *WOW* beater

PS All-Stars Island
What Nathan Drake did next: a Coke Zero *Temple Run* clone

PC game reviews
Driver problems, crashes to desktop – maybe consoles aren't so bad

TWEETS
Origin stories are really important for the DNA of a company. Luckily, you can make them up after the fact, like everybody does.
Giordano Contestabile @giordanobc
VP of product management and revenue at Tilting Point Media, and PopCap/EA alumnus

With multitasking and instant switching on PS4/Xbone, console developers will get to experience the thrill of supporting alt-tab. Enjoy, folks!
Steve Gaynor @fullbright
Co-founder, The Fullbright Company

'*GTA V* new trailer was awesome! This free control is future of the game. Makes me depressed as matter of fact. I don't think our '*V*' can reach that level. Rockstar's team are the best.
Hideo_kojima @HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN
VP of Konami Digital Entertainment and director of Kojima Productions

"Industrial product will ship to consumers." – the games press
Ian Bogost @ibogost
Professor (Georgia Tech), Game Designer (Persuasive Games)



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DISPATCHES
OCTOBER

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers compare next-gen consoles to typefaces, celebrate the second screen, and lament the narrow definition of games. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** considers the evolution of videogames' relationship with the humble canine over the past 20 years; **Leigh Alexander** considers what journalism means today in the field of games – and what it might be in the future; and **Brian Howe** takes a nostalgic look back at his very first column in issue one of **Edge**. Be warned, though: it references the Ninja Turtles.





Issue 257

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Letter of the month wins a PS Vita

Sofa politics

For me, handheld gaming is akin to reading a good book. It's cosy, easy to put down, and easy to pick up again as soon as an opportunity arises. I can start a game on the sofa, make progress in the bathroom, and hide in the garage if I want a bit of peace to reach a suitable point to save. It is an eminently efficient way to enjoy videogames as part of a healthy balanced lifestyle.

Console gaming is more like watching a movie. It needs more planning, a degree of preparation, an opportunity to reserve space in the lounge and undisturbed access to the TV. I have to avoid important television programmes, and time my slot so that partially closing the curtains is not considered wildly antisocial by other occupants of the sofa. Due to the restraints imposed by a family, it is something I achieve increasingly rarely.

With this backdrop, the concept of off-TV play offered by Nintendo and Sony starts to make a lot of sense. Granted, the glitz and glamour of modern games will be reduced slightly on a smaller screen, but when the options available are to stream games to a handheld or watch Strictly, I for one am willing to compromise.

For me, this could be the biggest failing of Xbox One; beyond the Microsoft PR implosion and baffling social media rubbish, this is the console that seems entirely reliant on the gamer having complete, undisturbed access to their lounge.

More, it is a true evolution of the current console model; it appears you now need space to wave at it, you need privacy so you can talk to it without family members laughing at you, and you need to maintain that vice-like grip on the TV remote to avoid disturbances. Of course, Microsoft points out the TV credentials of the Xbox One in its own right, but I'm not in the market for something that lets me watch telly on the telly.

I grew up playing games on a tiny TV in my bedroom, but accept that things have now moved on. Whilst it is nice to indulge in gaming on a whopping flat-screen with surround sound and a dedicated connection to the Internet, it seems entirely sensible to cater for those poor souls who must battle for extended custody of prime TV real estate and provide an alternative when they inevitably lose. The thought of my next console allowing me to slink back up to my bedroom with a screen and controller in my hand is really rather appealing.
Adam Tewkesbury

We couldn't agree more, but, just to set the record straight, Microsoft is throwing its weight behind second-screen gaming, too, with Surface, Windows Phone and iOS apps.

A bold leaning

Recently, I overheard people discussing the designs of next-gen consoles, and how the PS4 was the *italic* to the Xbox One's **bold**. This got me thinking about whether there was more to this analogy than just the console's architecture.

Italic is popular for its ability to add an emphasis or distinction, as well as suggesting a word (or console) is somewhat exotic. The PS4 has definitely distinguished itself as the no-brainer next-gen console for us gamers, which is fair to say is foreign territory for Sony in the past few years.

Then there's **bold**, a typeface with broad strokes. It certainly feels like Microsoft has backhanded us all pretty hard with their brand new Xbone, what with how we really just asked for a great game console but are forced to take a social media hub, a camera that's always watching you, and an eyewatering bill to top it all off.

If it isn't already obvious, I'm rooting for PS4. Not so much because the console is out of this world – if I wanted a console from a different planet, I'd just buy a Wii U – but because it's normal! The PS4 is only distinct, exotic and *italic* because it's surrounded by crazies.
Jack Tongeman

Which presumably makes Nintendo's Wii U something like School House Printed A?

The hub of the matter

The recent furore over the next-generation console debate has led me to consider why gamers responded so negatively to Microsoft's vision for an always-connected Xbox One, despite positive aspects such as the linking of an installed game to a profile, family sharing, digital game re-selling and living-room device convergence.

There's a fundamental disparity between the expectations of the market for a smartphone and for a DVD player. For the smartphone, a new iteration would be expected to facilitate its usage with obvious specification and operating system upgrades. Lately, however, the userbase has become fixated on innovation, or the lack thereof, and typically the more successful products and companies are the ones seen to be introducing the most novel yet functional concepts to accompany the raw upgrades. I think this is because the primary purpose of such a product is for pure interaction with the device itself, and such developments serve merely to improve this relationship between product and user. This is where the DVD player differs: it is simply a medium for users' consumption of, in this case, film. It's not the main attraction, and therefore doesn't necessitate innovation as this would lead the device out of the current definition of a DVD player.

In theory, the same ought to be true of a game console – existing as a sideshow

to the applications it's intended to run. This is clearly not the case. Console announcements are huge media events fuelled by how narrow the market generally is; this year it boils down to Sony against Microsoft. Their rivalry is rendering the market transcendent of DVD player values.

And so I can't help but wonder whether the Xbox One is not in fact a game console but a living-room hub – a media PC, in effect, driven out of its device category by either genuine vision from Microsoft or a contrived desire to innovate.

So it's a less desirable device than Sony's offering; the Xbox One has grown more indistinguishable from the familiar experience of the PC and therefore less self-justifying. And so Microsoft has, in the face of the Sony challenger, created not necessarily an inferior device, but made the PlayStation 4 a superior games console.
Edmund Flett

A fair point, but isn't it also a question of marketing? PlayStation 4 is a very capable media hub, but that functionality hasn't been the focus of Sony's message. It's made quite the difference.

"I wonder whether the Xbox One is not in fact a game console but a living room hub"

Alien counter

In **E**256, Stephen Poole wrote that "no satisfying videogame version of [Aliens] could actually be made", for it was a "war film that's more about tension than shooting". But such a game already exists – the opening chapters of Argonaut's *Alien Resurrection* – and there's no reason why lengthier, more refined games of that kind couldn't be created.

Argonaut's opening is a tense crawl through alien-infested backwaters where shooting is the farthest thing from your mind. The game captures the tone of the film, in particular Ripley's advance into the alien hive, very well. It delivers on Poole's demands for "tense waiting" punctuated by "chaotic shooting". However, it isn't fun in a conventional sense, and that seems to be an important measure of a game's success.

However, imagine if we redefined film around the idea of a summer blockbuster: fun, thrilling, action-led and easily comprehended. We could quite fairly assert that the remainder of films are merely cinematised literature or visual art, and declare that the movies have yet to create an emotionally intelligent bit of fiction. Yet it seems obvious to us that a movie image projected on a screen with synchronised sound is cinema, no matter the nuances of its internal structure. Why should a distinction be made in gaming?

I've just started playing *Dear Esther* and recall some of the debates about whether it really constitutes a game, what the boundaries between games and interactive fiction are, and whether gaming can ever deal with certain intellectual or social concepts in a meaningful fashion. There's a tendency to distinguish between games that are fun and involve intricate systems, and interactive fiction, which has simple systems and may not trigger much of a pleasure response.

Yet when I loaded up *Dear Esther*, I was quietly surprised to find I was using exactly the same cognitive tools, and exactly the same input method, as *Half-Life 2*. I certainly couldn't draw a line between wandering that island and my wanderings around City 17 in terms of storytelling. The newer title is unmistakably an offshoot of the most fundamental, core elements of the modern FPS. That there's a shooting mechanic layered on top of one but not the other hardly makes a difference. If the heart of a piece of interactive fiction can be exactly the same as the heart of a Real Game, then is the distinction meaningful?

With this in mind, there's plenty of reason to hope that games can explore broader emotional territory – even the lofty heights of James Cameron movies – so long as our definitions of 'game' are about the medium, and not the outcome.
Alexander Whiteside

The middle ground between the two extremes is becoming an increasingly fashionable space – think *Amnesia*, *Routine* or *The Forest*. It's certainly not an FPS, but perhaps *Limbo* on your new Vita will scratch your interactive fiction itch. ■



Alexander Whiteside asks: is *Dear Esther* really so removed from *Half-Life 2*?

ONLINE OFFLINE

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Will Bungie really manage to counter the trolls through its *Destiny* design?

I seem to remember a lot of talk rather like this prior to the last few *Halo* releases. All the fancy algorithms in the world can't fix XBL subscribers.
Dan Phillips

I play a *lot* of *Battlefield 3* and I must say it's very rare I get teabagged – and I've been killed about 20,000 times. Maybe Bungie is playing the wrong games?
Ronnie Silicz

Should publishers rely on sequels less?

Publishers make the big money with sequels, not with the first game in a series. *AC* was just a huge investment for Ubi, the big money came in with *AC II* and all the sequels. I am pretty sure it will be the same with *Watch Dogs*, because it was incredibly long in production. Publishers don't burn money, they typically just invest if they can make a brand out of it.
Benjamin Kratsch

Sequels that build on what has come before – yes please. Bland rehashes purely for the sake of sales – no thanks. *Half-Life 2* vs *FIFA* anybody?
Nick Meikle

They never made a sequel to Citizen Kane. They did however make a sequel to *Police Academy 5*.
Chris Adlington



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

So what exactly has changed in 20 years of videogaming? The portrayal of dogs, that's what

Twenty years ago this summer, I was dressing up as a saxophone-playing Nazi every evening in a student production of Joshua Sobol's play, Ghetto. (Obviously, I stopped dressing up as a Nazi when Prince Harry jumped on the bandwagon and made it kind of passé.)

Little did I suspect that one day we wouldn't have to work so hard to make our own entertainment, but could instead sit in front of a painting-sized screen any night of the week and shoot realistic-looking Nazis in the sneering fizzog for hours. (Although I have yet to find a videogame Nazi who plays a mean tenor.) A certain kind of progress has evidently been made.

Of course, by 1993, it had already been possible for a year to roam around a kind-of-3D space and shoot Nazis, in *Wolfenstein 3D*. That game – and the subsequently released *Doom* – set us on the path to the modern face-shooter, so the two decades that **Edge** has been publishing neatly bracket the evolution of today's noisiest and most bloodthirsty videogame genre.

Also in 1993, Nintendo announced its partnership with Silicon Graphics as Project Reality. Twenty years on, with hi-def consoles boasting about 20 times as much RAM as 1993 laptops had hard drive space, that project's name is still a fine description of one long-running evolutionary strategy for videogames as a whole. (The Wii, which brought the game outside the screen, is as important a stage in this wider Project Reality as the Oculus Rift will be.)

But just as important a change as the achievement of near-photorealistic naturalism has been the wider change in how we play videogames, which was brought home to me on a recent visit to a seafront arcade. The only real reason for coin-op games to exist now is to allow you to play with increasingly absurd plastic prostheses. I did enjoy slapping the bottom of the magazine to reload on a Terminator-licensed robot-shooting game, although I was inconsolable when it turned out the arcade didn't also contain a game that let me smash plastic moles with a large bouncy mallet.

> Twenty years on, we have entered what I have previously called an age of 'ambient play'

Revealingly, though, the most popular cabinet in the place, round which teenagers were crowding excitedly, was *Temple Run* – a game you can play just about anywhere, on your phone. Presumably it is also fun to play in the arcade because the large screen enables a more social, performative kind of play. But it is really popular because people already know it from the small screen. Perhaps the most unexpected yet socially important change in videogames over the past 20 years, then, is that their consumption is no longer tied to place or dedicated portables. We have entered what I have previously called an age of 'ambient play'.

Morally, you can also look at these past 20 years as a period of increasing concern for the rights of virtual animals. Some beasts have long enjoyed high status in videogames – foxes (*Star Fox* was released in 1993), bandicoots, llamas – but consider the more problematic situation of the humble dog. In the progressive world of Nintendo, a dog is something to be nurtured, and in the great *Okami* the starring role is played by the dog's feral cousin, the wolf.

But in the modern successors to 1993's *Doom* – the *Modern Warfare*s, the *Far Cry*s – the dog has been a snarling, ferocious pest that's almost impossible to shoot before it leaps at your throat. Then, for some reason best known to dog-hating videogame developers, you have to play a horrible dog-based minigame in which you try to punch the dog in the face by following QTE prompts until you have smashed the poor canine's jaw to bits or broken its neck.

I fondly remember how, when my friend and I were playing *Modern Warfare 2*'s special ops level O Cristo Redentor (aka O Cristiano Ronaldo), it wasn't the human enemies that bothered us; it was the bloody dogs. Every time we shot ten people we would hear distant barking, race in panic to a small hut we had identified that had only one entrance, and stand guard. There the dogs would blithely enter to be met by a hail of crossfire and bloodthirsty shouting. And thankfully they would usually succumb to about 200 bullets, before getting the chance to be badly punched in the face by one of us as it writhed on the floor.

You can imagine, then, how excited I am by the announcement of a new remote-controlled dog simulator in which the hound is the glorious military hero of the piece. Paying lip service to genre expectations, *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* does apparently also feature some pretend human beings, who probably express emotions and stuff in cutscenes while they're not acting like superhuman mass murderers in the game proper.

But I'm sure we can all agree that the reversal of *Call of Duty*'s historic cynophobia (that's the fear of dogs, lexophiles) is the real story here. Over the next 20 years, I can only hope that videogames will also learn to take a more ecologically friendly and caring approach to giant sandworms, gloop-dripping aliens with 15 sets of jaws, and spiders.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Twenty years on, we're still learning what game journalism is all about – now and in the future

Twenty years of **Edge**, eh? When I was a young teen, the idea that I might grow up to be a videogame journalist was barely a quickening on the edge of my consciousness – I was just a normal fan, really, writing romantic *Final Fantasy* fan fiction with strangers on America Online, and listening to *Chrono Cross* soundtracks in my office job. Friday nights were for *Klax* marathons on my Sega Genesis. Normal stuff, really. I almost didn't notice I'd become an obsessive. I thought I'd grow up to be an actress or something. But here we are.

Recently the journalist and author Kieron Gillen, who I consider one of my most important progenitors, posted an image of an old **Edge** house ad. I'm not sure how old, but I must have been in proverbial diapers at the time it ran, a sterling whisper from across the sea. In a few lines of stark copy it outlines the magazine's mandate to be different than the others – "Some have posters, or stickers. Some review every game good, bad or average. **Edge** isn't like that."

Notably, it includes the line, "To be honest, **Edge** isn't for everyone." To me, this is a perfectly reasonable statement: how can content serve without specificity? What circumspection can come from the desire to please everyone? In the '90s, the whispers of an elite publication from across the sea was the stuff of legend. We were all desperate to get our hands on a copy, and the unapologetic scarcity outlined in the advert only heightened our desire.

Now that I've spent some time living in London, I better understand the uniquely British allergy to elitism – or to bold declarations of any kind lest they suggest elitism. And why **Edge**'s decision to be alternative was much braver and much more abrasive then it would have been in America, where the ability to state individualist, even domineering, rhetoric confidently – as if you believe it – is trained into us as a 'business skill'.

In my time living here, I've found British adverts fascinating – the way superlatives are used in taglines hesitantly if at all, like they taste bad. I understand how hard it must have been to state the controversial goal of different-better-more, and I admire that step all the more.

> These days, I still feel no sea changes can come without confidence and contention

These days I still feel no sea changes can come about without confidence and contention, and 20 years has still not been enough time for videogame journalism and the culture surrounding it to have shaken off the yoke of product culture. The idea that our jobs can go beyond placing objects on a 'good, bad or average' scale – that we may be wholly obligated to go beyond that – is still regarded in some circles as revolutionary at best, superfluous or self-important at worst.

Certainly plenty of things have changed: the flourishing of personal perspective has normalised the idea that games can be a transformative power in one's life, and not just a software item to be compartmentalised and checkmarked. The shift in the market that has allowed indies and small companies to forge their own, successful paths has also made it possible for us to understand the human work of game development, to do thought-provoking dialogue on intentions, influences and private struggles.

Writers on games more broadly build a culture and a vocabulary, decreasing the team sports approach to hardware and corporations that once diminished our experience of the medium in favour of lathering brand loyalties and mediating childish Internet arguments.

We're getting there, even if not consciously, course-correcting gently over time as we understand that our work can be so much more than putting a 'buy it or not' score on something and saying, "Job done"; or publishing the profile that the marketing executive intends us to write when he dazzles us with the great honour of access to the industry we're supposed to interrogate.

We're learning what the word journalism means for games, and that will continue to happen, not by comparing it to work done in other media and not by comparing ourselves to other critics – the who is the so-and-so of games, and where is the this-and-that of games, are tired and insulting questions. We will answer those questions in our own in time, or history will answer them for us.

Even if it was controversial, **Edge**'s declaration that crowd-pleasing as a primary objective doesn't result in transformative work is an excellent message for all of us doing games writing, even now. I want more for games journalism. I want my readership to want more from us. From me.

Nonetheless, what would a games magazine for everyone look like, I wonder? Now that videogames stand to address a massive general audience, now that niche fans are just a sliver on an uncharted and fascinating spectrum, what would 'for everyone' even mean?

Could we do more work – intelligent, dialogue-leading, curious, creative and informative work – that's not for fans or people who play videogames, but simply for people, even if that would now be controversial? That, I think, is the most interesting question for a new generation of games critics, journalists, essayists and writers of all kinds – as we look to the next 20 years.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media





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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

An attempt to decipher the future of game journalism by remembering where it all began – and why

Can you believe **Edge** has been around for 20 years now? I'll never forget that summer in 1993 when the ring of a transparent landline phone changed my life forever. The caller wanted to know if I would join a staff of seasoned videogame journalists as a columnist in a new magazine, which surprised me so much I spilled Crystal Pepsi all over a stack of Pogs.

The job offer was a shock because my sole publication credit then was a letter to Nintendo Power – a rap about *Double Dragon* in iambic pentameter – and I was, in fact, barely 14 years old. After **Edge**'s editor persuaded my mom that he was not a child predator, I accepted the brief and the rest is history. The magazine grew into an international juggernaut, not only surviving the Internet's genocidal spree against physical magazines but thriving in an almost ostentatious way. Look at those spot varnishes and foils used on the cover! It's the kind of print treatment you'd imagine a Monaco oil baron using on his wedding invitations.

Meanwhile, You're Playing It Wrong became the widely beloved institution it is today, spawning spin-offs from You're Cooking It Wrong to Estás Jugando Mal, not to mention a certain Internet meme you know so well. Its contributions to the culture were ultimately recognised with eight successive Pulitzer nods for Silly Gaming Journalism – a category in which it was the only nominee.

As inevitable as the column's global influence seems now, if you had told me in 1993 that I'd still be writing it two decades later, I probably would have given you a purple nurple while screeching like a velociraptor (Jurassic Park was huge that summer). Worldwide renown was still beyond my wildest dreams, which were then more concerned with ambiguous scenarios involving Cindy Crawford – who I went on to marry and have two lovely children, Slater and Fennel, with.

Birthdays are a time for reflection and mortification and, in honour of **Edge**'s 20th, what follows is a reprint – warts and all, but with contemporary annotations – of my very first column from the August 1993 debut issue, which was themed 'The Changing Face of Videogames' and made almost mystical claims about a new system on the horizon, the 3DO. Faithful readers who grew up on YPIW know that it often attempts to foretell the future of gaming, and as luck would have it, I chose to survey the landscape of 2013 back in 1993. Let's see how my predictions fared…

Cowabunga, dudes! [I can't remember why I thought a TMNT catchphrase was a great opener during the franchise's declining *Turtles In Time* era.] I still have to finish a book report on Animal Farm tonight and Blossom is on in half an hour, so I can't promise I'll finish this whole column. [Blossom was a popular sitcom about wearing enormous floppy hats, which apparently meant more to me than writing for a national magazine.] Anyways, can you believe this changing face of videogames of ours? You know what would make it look even better? DEEZ NUTS! [Specifically, this was a reference to Dr Dre and Snoop Dogg, although I'm afraid my early columns all leaned heavily on testicle-based jokes.] I wonder what it will look like in 20 years.

With the Super Nintendo and Genesis on the way out and the Jaguar and 3DO on the way in, Atari and Panasonic will be THE big names in gaming in 2013. Why? One word: polygons. [I had no idea what this buzzword meant but played off my ignorance nicely here.] These new systems either have a ton of polygons or just a few really fancy ones, whichever is good. [Not so much here. And of course, the 3DO would fail because of a price point equivalent to that of a medical catastrophe; the Jaguar because of a powerful programming architecture that required expertise in Martian calculus to make games on.] The only thing that might save Nintendo now is the revolutionary Super FX Chip, which makes polygons spin three times faster [not even close] and will surely be used in way more than four or five games [oops].

> What follows is a reprint – warts and all, but with contemporary annotations – of my first column

In 2013, who knows whether Atari and Panasonic games will be played on screens, holograms or even the 'World Wide Web'? [A touch of prescience there!] But one thing is for sure: they won't have any violence in them, which sucks. *Mortal Kombat* has come to consoles and sparked a huge debate over whether violence in videogames is a dangerous influence. Those who argue that it's not suffered an eerily symbolic setback this week when Hiram Wigglesbottom, the 94-year-old creator of pioneering analogue computer game *Cursor Skirmish*, died after a deranged *Mortal Kombat* fan uppercutted his head off at a convention booth, mistaking him for Reptile.

This is why we shouldn't expect much current impact or lasting influence from an upcoming id Software title about running through corridors shooting zombies, called *Doom*. Rumour has it that you can't even see your character. No chance that will ever catch on! Furthermore… [Mercifully, the column ends mid-sentence – Blossom came on.]

Brian Howe writes about books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Kill Screen

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H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content



Ready, set, go

Blame *Minecraft*. Before Mojang moved the goalposts, our pre-release access to a game was tightly controlled. There'd be hands-off presentations and small, playable slices of a game because its creator didn't want us to see the state of the work-in-progress whole. Then Markus Persson put out an alpha which proved so popular that he held a convention in Las Vegas to celebrate its full release. Now such releases are common, and are an increasingly viable route to market for indies without marketing budgets.

Yet with this new opportunity comes a new kind of pressure. A game needs to have a level of mechanical completeness; it needs to be fully playable in a coherent world. Paying customers expect a steady flow of new content, as the concept they bought into grows into something worthy of the label v1.0. The merits of every new addition and tweak will be scrutinised by a passionate audience that's far more knowledgeable and invested than publisher moneymen, and a good deal harder to please.

It's precisely this situation that Adhesive Games finds itself in. *Hawken* immediately caught the attention, both in concept (a free-to-play arena shooter starring customisable mecha) and story (its original team numbered just six people). Almost two-and-a-half years after its debut trailer, *Hawken* is finally gearing up for commercial launch. On p46 we detail the player progression system that will power the game's transition from intriguing concept to final release.

The voxel-based, procedurally generated *Cube World* (p52) invites comparisons to *Minecraft*, and openly acknowledges the inspiration. An action-RPG in an infinite world, it already has vast scope and the playerbase to match, but now the work begins: fitting an RPG quest structure into a game with randomness at its core. The foundations, if anything, lend themselves better to an alpha than a full game, something else that would have been unthinkable before *Minecraft* changed everything.

MOST WANTED

Sportsfriends PS3, PC, Mac
Die Gute Fabrik's *Sportsfriends* is being made with the noblest of intentions: an attempt to revive local multiplayer at the fag-end of a generation where competition has been almost exclusively online.

Super Smash Bros 3DS, Wii U
The appearance of *Super Smash Bros Melee* at Evo 2013 served only to whet our appetite for the series' next entry. Over 100,000 viewers tuned in to the live stream – a timely showcase of how pacy and dynamic *Smash* can be, and a better advert for the new game than any number of Nintendo Direct broadcasts.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One, Wii U
A replay of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Brotherhood* has us champing at the bit for more. Hopes are high for *Black Flag*, but we do have one concern: playing Ezio's games with Italian dialogue evoked a stronger atmosphere and handily obscured some lukewarm voice acting.



THE SIMS 4

Maxis simulates more of what makes us human

Publisher	EA
Developer	Maxis
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2014

Everybody knows that *The Sims* expands. It's one of the most continually iterated series in history, each main title receiving more add-on packs than the last.

What is less obvious about *The Sims* is that, at key intervals, the series contracts. Next year, Maxis will release *The Sims 4* – and all that accrued expansion content will reset back to zero to allow the studio to make fundamental changes to the way its life simulation operates.



Producer **Lindsay Pearson** has been working on the series since the original game. "We hit a point during *The Sims 3* where we wondered where the Sims were going to go next – what was the next evolution of what a 'Sim' means?" she says. "For *The Sims 4*, that was going back to the Sims themselves. [The decision to create a full sequel] is triggered by an idea, and then we have conversations about whether it is the technology that has to change or the content. This time it was both."

Pearson began work on the sequel almost three years ago. Individual groups of developers move from the previous game to the new one as they become needed, starting with the engineers responsible for the base-level simulation and moving up through concept artists and content designers.

For *The Sims 4*, work has been done to rebuild the game's pathfinding and animation engines from scratch. Previous *Sims* games have given the impression of being tile-based, with characters moving in stiff, fixed patterns between context-specific actions. In *The Sims 4*, characters dynamically adjust their positioning relative to what they're doing and the social environment they find themselves in. Maxis has studied footage of crowd behaviour – filmed in EA's Redwood City headquarters – in order to accurately represent the way, for example, a group of people chatting will respond to a new person approaching their circle. In *The Sims 4*, a character's awareness is visible: their head and upper body move to acknowledge the new person, and they smoothly step back to create space in a way that is far more fluid than in the series' past. The new animation framework has reaped other benefits, too – Sims can now pass each other on the stairs and walk through doorways as a group without causing a logjam.





***The Sims 4* producers Lindsay Pearson and Ryan Vaughan**

These may sound like small changes at first, but they're significant in practice: the experience of a *Sims* player is predicated on details like this – on the believability of the world that the player creates in tandem with the game. Furthermore, more fluid animation has a knock-on effect on game mechanics. In *The Sims 4*, a character can multitask,



Custom-designed room sets can now be pulled fully furnished from the house creator, and will resize intelligently when pushed or pulled at the fringe





Events in a Sim's life can trigger memories that allow them to return to that emotional state later. It's a way of giving the player some degree of control while keeping the focus on the Sims themselves

Maxis's designers have a grounding in fashion design: it's an important part of the game for many fans, who contribute their own fashions to the third game's social network using a set of surprisingly in-depth tools



performing several actions at once as long as they don't contradict each other on a physical level. This could mean running on a treadmill while watching TV, filling up Entertainment and Exercises meters at the same time. It could mean eating dinner around a table while telling a joke, or washing the dishes while having a conversation. At its core, *The Sims* is a management game with a heavy veneer of wish-fulfilment fantasy: in allowing for more flexible use of time that also happens to be more true to life, *The Sims 4*'s new animation system promises to serve both masters.

That said, Maxis is also overhauling the Sims' internal lives in an attempt to create a greater sense of autonomy and personality. "People have always extended their emotions onto their Sims," producer **Ryan Vaughan** says. "Now, Sims have their own emotions and they're going to be pushing back against the player. They're living beings, they have feelings, and the gameplay evolves from that."

At any given time, a Sim will occupy a particular emotional state, from the relatively neutral Fine to the self-explanatory Elated, Depressed, Angry and Romantic. There are 14 in total, and rather than existing on a spectrum (Angry to Content, for example) they each exist as a separate state, experienced with varying degrees of intensity. A Sim's emotional state affects everything from their posture to their walk, facial expression and voice.

Moods also grant positive and negative status effects, and unlock unique interactions with objects in the environment. Interestingly, emotions themselves aren't 'good' or 'bad' at a mechanical level: they all have their uses, and players interested in micromanagement will be encouraged to experiment.

An inspired Sim might be more likely to paint a masterpiece, for instance, but a depressed Sim will gain access to a unique set of sombre artistic, writing and musical styles that have a greater emotional impact on the Sims around them. Likewise, an angry Sim may be more likely to get into a fight but also exercises more effectively, gaining the ability to 'Rage Run' on a treadmill or take out their anger on a punch bag.

Players can game the emotion system by directing their Sims to consume specific drinks, watch certain types of entertainment and occupy particular environments. Furnishings and architecture act as amplifiers – a dark, candlelit room, for instance, is more likely to result in a successful dinner date.

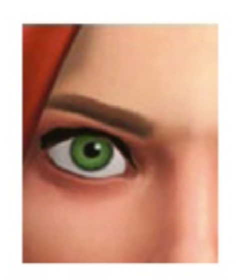
Overhauled building design tools look set to reduce the frustration of configuring an ideal Sims home. While superficially similar to the grid-based toolset of previous games, a smart set of new features makes tweaking homes on the fly much easier than it has been before. The game now recognises closed-off spaces as rooms, which can be picked up and moved elsewhere, with doors and windows automatically reconfiguring to make sense of the new layout. If you've ever had to painstakingly move every item in a kitchen simply to extend a wall by a single tile, you'll appreciate the new system.

The game recognises intent far more intelligently than before, too. A gap between two balustrades on a terrace will be understood as a potential new location for an extension or a staircase, and the relevant pieces will resize accordingly. This ties into a broad shift in architectural style away from New England towards Louisiana and the gallery houses of the American South.

"Sims have emotions and they're going to be pushing back against the player"

Maxis is staying quiet about the big picture at present; there's no word on which careers and life stages will make the transition, nor how many towns will be available at launch or what form the game's online features will take. The latter point will be especially key given the problems that plagued Maxis's previous outing, *SimCity*, at launch. Nonetheless, a renewed focus on the finer details of human experience – and the tools that allow *Sims* players to reenact them – bodes well for the future.

"Building an expansion pack is very much about what we want to add," Vaughan says. "Going back to a base game is about how we want to evolve the experience into something new that's not been done before." ■



Face facts

Character creation is incredibly important in *The Sims*, and the system has seen a complete overhaul for *The Sims 4*. Features that came to the series in expansions – such as customising the proportions of body parts – are now regarded as core, and the tools used to manipulate them have been substantially rethought. Adjusting a Sim's face and body shape now simply means grabbing it with the mouse and tugging it into the desired shape, a kind of sculpting process. Furthermore, it's possible to select a walking style in addition to a look and voice.

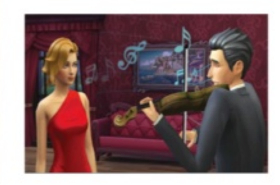












ABOVE **Certain actions – such as a cruel comment or a moving piece of music – can be used to trigger emotional states in other Sims. This is one way for players to micromanage the system**

ABOVE **Allowing Sims to socialise in a variety of poses and while performing a range of actions creates a much more realistic sense of communal living. Charismatic Sims will hold the attention of those around them**



LEFT **For the first time in the series, it's possible to adjust ceiling height. Windows and other ornamentation will dynamically scale to fit, and doing so can create spaces with lighting profiles that weren't possible in previous games**





HYPE

HAWKEN

Can Adhesive build a game that's worthy of its thunderous tech?

Publisher	Meteor Entertainment
Developer	Adhesive Games
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	Autumn

The detail on *Hawken*'s models is astonishing, mixing believably functional design with endearing personality. Out in the field, however, they look a lot more battered than this pristine render



Hawken is a game that punishes egotism. For all the empowerment bestowed on the pilots of its heavyset mecha, those who place glory over camaraderie will soon come a cropper. You may be powerful, but so is everybody else – and if you find yourself cut off and surrounded there's very little chance of survival. It's a fitting parallel given how deeply involved the community has been in the formation of Adhesive Games' debut. A two-way discussion has resulted in continual tweaking and balancing during the game's open beta, resulting in a game that feels uncommonly cooperative in both gameplay and ethos; it's a rare session in which your kill total is higher than your assist count. The ongoing relationship between developer and player will culminate in a major overhaul of the game's player progression system, as *Hawken*'s well-oiled mechanical joints settle into their final position ahead of its autumn launch.

The current setup allows you to slowly improve the mecha you acquire within three upgrade trees – offence, defence and movement – using Optimisation Points, earned from levelling up through battles. Those points come rather slowly, making it difficult to justify using more than one mecha in the field – despite their different abilities – while the class system is rather undermined by each using the same skill tree. Adhesive's answer, in simple terms, is to split progression in two: pilots and mecha now earn XP independently, while the rejigged and renamed Tuning Points system provides access to more specialised upgrades.



Khang Le, CEO and creative director, Adhesive Games

"Our new pilot progression, mech progression and mech unlocks all tie together to create a much deeper experience," says Adhesive Games' CEO and creative director **Khang Le**. "A lot of fans were asking for something like this. They felt the game didn't have enough complexity and richness, and that's what this addresses."

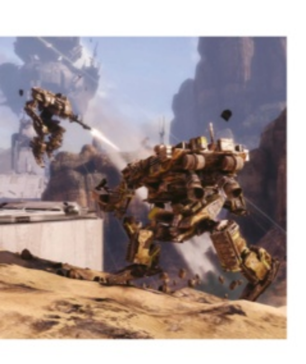
Perhaps the most significant difference is that the separated pilot progression will generate a pool of Tuning Points that can be fed into every mecha you own. This removes the need to decide where a single, precious point will end up and, Adhesive hopes, will encourage people to switch between different classes during a match. Pilots will progress through 30 levels – up from the current 25 – divided between three tiers, with each level reached granting a Tuning Point, access to new equipment, and new mecha. The tiers will also be used to further shore up the matchmaking system.

Internals and weapons will still take up slots within each mecha, but you'll now



While there are countless mecha universes to choose from, *Hawken* feels distinct from the crowd thanks to its charismatic art style – it's a look that has translated almost entirely intact from the original concept artwork





Despite each unit's weight and size, encounters between mecha are fast moving and reliant on crafty manoeuvring – these are anything but ponderous machines

earn more slots as you become a more experienced pilot – and those pieces of equipment won't just take up a single slot, but instead require two, three or four depending on their potency. Animator **Chris Lalli** reveals one new item in the form of the Air 180, which allows you to perform the standard escape manoeuvre (achieved by hitting boost and S) after jump-jetting.

The Tuning system, meanwhile, is a much broader version of the existing Optimisation tree. Some categories, like boosting armour, are shared between all units, but there will now also be new threads that are specific to particular sub-classes. The Technician, for example, has an entire tree dedicated to its healing torch (which accelerates teammates' field repair process). Since it will never be possible to max out all of the trees – you're limited to those core 30 Tuning Points – even mecha of the same class will play differently based on players' choices.

However, while your accrued Tuning Points can be used in all of your mecha, you'll still have to upgrade each one in order to take full advantage of your Pilot progression. They're also bound by tiers that limit the number of Tuning Points you can pump into them. Upgrading to a new tier will require a one-off payment of either Hawken Credits, earned in-game, or Meteor Credits, bought with real money – both of which can be used to buy new mecha and equipment at any time. Each tier will bring upgrades and rewards suited to the unit's class.

You'll still be able to earn XP, even with a fully upgraded mecha. Any points earned this way will be automatically transferred to an overflow pool, the contents of which can be pumped into any of your other machines. It's an appealing system that will allow players to stick with their favourite mecha, but still encourage experimentation with other classes and sub-classes. You could even have multiple versions of the same unit for different styles.

The ways in which player and mecha progressions interact seem rather complex on paper, but Le promises a reworked AI will do most of the heavy lifting for players, allowing for a deep system that's easily understood. Naturally, players will have a lot more on their plate from the off than those who've already been playing, which is why Adhesive is also addressing *Hawken*'s undercooked tutorial.

Currently, new players complete a short tutorial, watch a couple of videos and jump straight into online play. Failing to understand the importance of pack hunting will rapidly result in the ignoble destruction of your mecha. There's a deathmatch mode to ease you in, but it's not the full *Hawken* experience – Lalli admits that while it's not the best showcase for the game, it does provide an excellent place for players to "blow off steam".

"We're working on training for new players," says producer **Jason Hughes**, "completely redoing our tutorial for brand new players and then going through all the movement mechanics, firing the weapons, overheating and so on. We're adding a training mode where you fight bots."

The next step will be the new co-op training mode, which also lets you face off against bots, and should help instil the (possibly novel) value of teamwork in players. "We have some data that new players tend to jump into deathmatch first because there's this psychological fear of letting down your teammates," Hughes continues. "We think these steps will help get more people into real matches, and lower that barrier to getting out there and having fun with others."

> ***"New players jump into deathmatch first for fear of letting down their teammates"***

This overhaul is a convincing stride towards making *Hawken* a fully fledged game, and one that will likely attract many more players, though its servers are already busy. It looks set to address the steep learning curve and ensure fewer instances where you face a mecha that far outstrips your own. There are still maps that, while beautiful, can be tricky to navigate and feel overwhelming without the full complement of players, but a HUD that always shows your teammates' positions goes some way to alleviating frustrations. *Hawken*'s unique pace and ability to build alliances reveals that Adhesive is capable of much more than just clever tech. ■



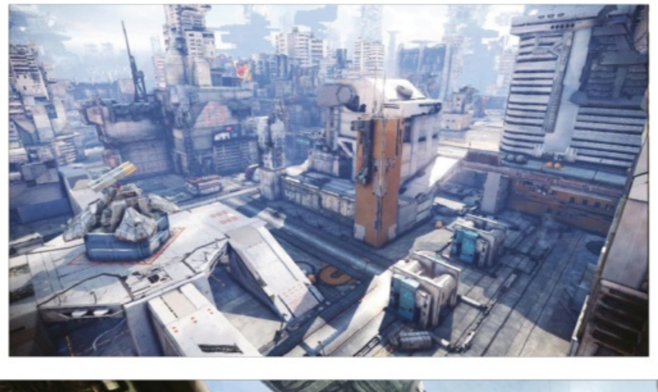


Producer Jason Hughes (above) and animator Chris Lalli

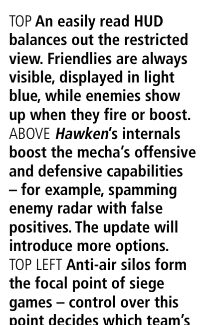


Striking similarities

Anybody who followed *Hawken*'s early days will find it hard not to see similarities in *Strike Vector*, a futuristic first- and thirdperson air combat game starring transforming jets. Heavy metal combat, incredible visuals and the work of a small team: we wonder what Adhesive thinks about the strong impression its work appears to have made on *SV*'s creators. "I actually reached out to the [*Strike Vector*] team because they remind us of our garage days," Le enthuses. "Seeing another very small team coming up and making something very cool is great – we want to support them as well."







TOP An easily read HUD balances out the restricted view. Friendlies are always visible, displayed in light blue, while enemies show up when they fire or boost. ABOVE *Hawken*'s internals boost the mecha's offensive and defensive capabilities – for example, spamming enemy radar with false positives. The update will introduce more options. TOP LEFT Anti-air silos form the focal point of siege games – control over this point decides which team's battle cruiser stays in flight. LEFT Siege Mode, which sees teams battling to destroy a base with a giant battleship, is the team's favourite. "Siege shines the most when playing with a team of friends," says Le



LEFT With graphics settings on ultra and PhysX enabled, battles look and feel terrifying. Particle effects and incredible lighting fill the screen as missiles and lasers are exchanged and mecha torn apart









Publisher Capcom
Developer In-house
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Japan
Release Q1 2014





ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

Some familiar faces star in Capcom's latest rebalancing act

It's not quite fair to say the new characters have been copied and pasted from *Street Fighter X Tekken*; Capcom has tweaked a few shaders, at least, to have them fit *SFIV*'s inky style

Never mind the new characters: seasoned players will be most interested in changes to their existing favourites. Capcom has been commendably open to fan input since this rebalancing act was first announced

Given that *Street Fighter X Tekken* failed to capture either the hearts of fighting game players or the wallets of a wider audience, it's little surprise to see Capcom dipping into the *SFXT* asset libraries for this, the third major revision to *Street Fighter IV*. Four of this game's five new characters have been imported from the crossover title, but producer **Tomoyaki Ayano** insists this isn't just a case of dropping a failed game's models into the engine of one whose appeal endures five years on from its arcade debut.

"They will definitely not just be copied and pasted," he tells us. "The battle systems of the two games are completely different, so the characters will play completely differently. A lot of work goes into making these characters fit within the *SFIV* framework."

The absence of *SFXT*'s universal Boost combo system will certainly mean that four of *USFIV*'s five new characters play differently, but they sure do look the same. *Final Fight*'s German giant Hugo benefited the most from the Boost combo, which gave him mobility to go with his tremendous power. How he will fare in a game in which grapplers tend to struggle is for Capcom to figure out, but he has the tools to cope, including a handclap which nullifies projectiles.

Like Hugo, Rolento was deemed so powerful in *Street Fighter X Tekken* that he was toned down in a patch; Poison, however, the pink-haired fighter who debuted with Hugo in *Final Fight* and whose gender remains a source of some debate, will need some improvement to ensure there's no repeat of her lacklustre *Street Fighter X Tekken* incarnation. The final *SFXT* import is Elena, the hard-hitting African whose Capoeira fighting style made





ABOVE CENTRE **Capcom's character design is still unmatched in fighting games – every one of the fighters it has created in the past 25 years is immediately recognisable, including *Final Fight*'s mop-coiffed Hugo.**
ABOVE **The *Street Fighter X Tekken* incarnation of Poison left much to be desired – she was much slower than her slender build would suggest, without increased damage output to compensate**







LEFT **Elena was first introduced in *Street Fighter III*, and fans have long pestered Capcom's Yoshinori Ono to add her to *SFIV*'s cast. There's no sign – yet – of his personal favourite, *Alpha 3*'s Rainbow Mika**

LEFT **Hugo's Giant Palm Breaker absorbs projectiles and does heavy damage. We doubt he'll be as mobile as in *SFXT*, and should be easier to keep at a distance**



her feel more like a *Tekken* character than one drawn from Capcom's asset libraries.

The fifth character – who will, in true Capcom style, be unveiled closer to release – won't be a brand-new creation, but new to the *Street Fighter* series. Until the curtain is pulled back on this mystery fifth pugilist it's tempting to see *USFIV* as Capcom at its iterative worst. We're promised six new stages: only three have

"The fans demanded more updates, which is why we responded with Ultra SFIV"

been announced so far, and all featured in *Street Fighter X Tekken*.

That, of course, will be of little concern to the players whose love affair with *Street Fighter IV* spans hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of play. For them it's the little tweaks – Yang's cross-up, Ken's sweep combos, Dhalsim's armour-breaking limb – that will make the difference. Capcom also intends to tone down the more powerful characters, such as Cammy and Akuma, while buffing up those at the other end of the tier lists.

"The balancing concept we are sticking to is to reduce the gap between the top and bottom tiers," Ayano explains. "Every character should have the chance to do well at a major tournament. That being said, we don't want to make every character too powerful, because that would lead to unbalanced match-ups and a lack of diversity. So it's important for us to tone down the things that need to be toned down and buff the things that need to be improved. We are aiming to make *Ultra Street Fighter IV* the most balanced iteration yet."

That's an ambitious goal given that the current version, *Super Street Fighter IV Arcade Edition Version 2012*, is widely regarded as the most finely balanced game in the entire series. Ayano admits that Capcom has in the past "underestimated the effectiveness of certain changes," and it's key that past mistakes are not repeated. New consoles will be on shelves by the time *Ultra Street Fighter IV* is released: is this, then, the final version of the game which revived an entire genre? "It's really up to the community and the fans," Ayano says. "The fans demanded more updates to *Arcade Edition*, which is why we responded with *Ultra Street Fighter IV*. We hope that the community will continue to enjoy and support the series." For that to happen, Capcom must ensure that the only things *Ultra Street Fighter IV* shares with *Street Fighter X Tekken* are a few background stages and character models.



Redress the rebalance

With its array of costume colours and stat-boosting gems, *Street Fighter X Tekken* had so many microtransactions it might as well have been free-to-play. Throughout *Street Fighter IV*'s life, however, Capcom has made its post-release money through downloadable costume packs. *Ultra Street Fighter IV* will be sold either as a download or on a retail disc, with the latter bundled with every costume that's ever been released. Don't take that as meaning Capcom is done playing dress-up: five alternates are being offered as a preorder bonus, and more are surely to follow in the months after release.

Crimson Viper is one of the more unusual members of *Street Fighter*'s cast, her super-jump cancels and complex moveset making her feel more like an SNK character than a Capcom creation



Publisher Picroma
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin Germany
Release 2014

HYPE





If a campfire has a bed next to it, you're in luck – flop down and your HP will recharge. The game's random nature, of course, means sometimes you'll find only an unusable tent or chair

CUBE WORLD

A procedurally generated voxel world ripe for exploration

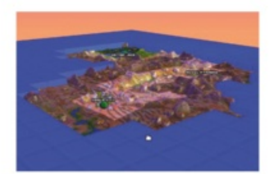
The inspirations here are obvious, and **Wolfram Von Funck**, *Cube World*'s creator, is only too happy to acknowledge them. Setting out to make a game in his favourite genre, the 3D action-RPG, on his own, he realised the gargantuan task that faced him. Markus Persson's work showed him the way. "I knew it would be hard for one person," he tells us. "Designing models, dungeons, landscapes, buildings, animations, textures… but after playing *Minecraft*, I was so impressed with what you can achieve with a procedurally generated, block-based environment that I decided to try something similar: a procedurally generated world made of cubes."

The results, untextured and voxel-based, are as beautiful as they are evocative of Mojang's seminal game. Yet while *Minecraft* put crafting materials in the hands of its players and let them bend the world to their will, *Cube World*'s landscape is fixed but randomly generated – and infinite. There will always be cities, dungeons and castles, but their placement and the lay of the land itself will forever be unique, generated from a string of numbers input by the player at the start of a new game.

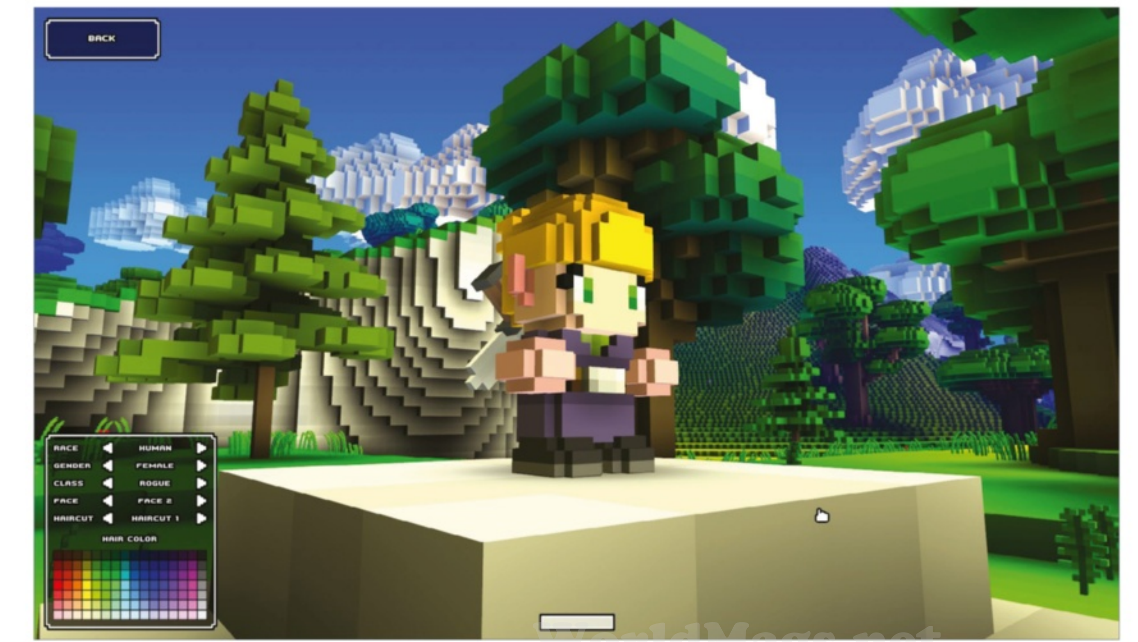
As such, there's a true sense of adventure in taking your first steps in the world, once you've settled on a class and race for your character. The world map is a vast expanse of unmapped blue save for a tiny square in the centre that denotes your current surroundings. It fills in as you go along, marking out towns and lands in a blocky font whose colour-coded lettering denotes whether an area's enemies are above, below or similar to your current level. Dotted lines, meanwhile, denote gateways to new areas –

Eight races are available, with the standard Humans, Dwarfs, Goblins and Orcs joined by Lizardmen, Frogmen and Undead. The four classes – Rogue, Mage, Ranger and Warrior – can specialise as they level up



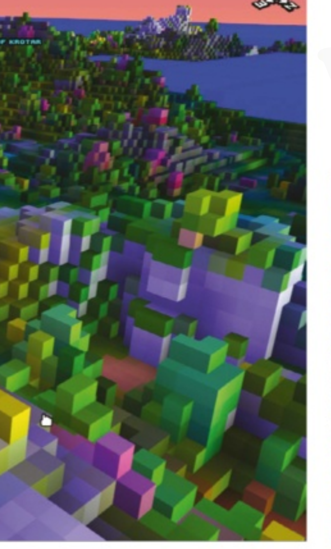


ABOVE **You can zoom and rotate the map, helping plot your course towards your next destination. The barren blue sections that denote unexplored terrain are always the most inviting**



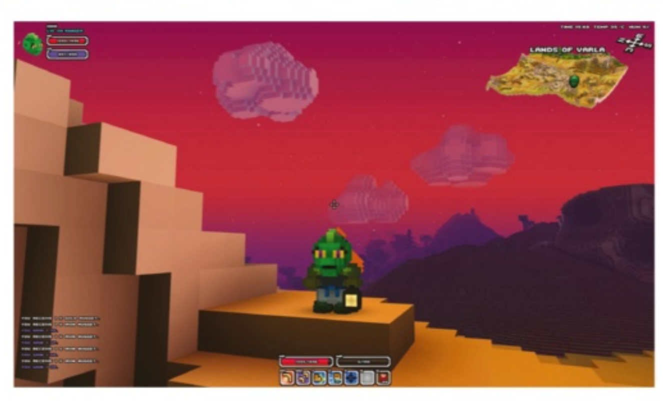


Cube World **creator Wolfram Von Funck**





LEFT **We'll admit to being disappointed by the realisation that access to boats and hang-gliders is hidden some way up the skill tree, but it makes sense**



TOP **Only mouse-and-keyboard controls are supported at the moment, though the Von Funcks are working on gamepad support. "It plays really well," Wolfram tells us. "We will try to bring *Cube World* to consoles."**
ABOVE **Early on you're best sticking to one area, tuning your combat skills against low-level enemies**

we found barren deserts, snowy tundras and dense jungles, though more lie in wait.

Yet while the world itself is designed to evoke 16bit games such as *Secret Of Mana*, mechanically *Cube World* owes a debt to PC MMOGs and action-RPGs. Your avatar's standard attack is bound to the left mouse button, with a class-specific special on the right and a dodge in between. Defeated enemies drop XP and, if you're lucky, loot; levelling up boosts stats and gives you a couple of skill points; and crafting materials can be turned into weapons and gear in the game's towns. There are boss fights, too – marked with crossed swords on the map, generated in every one of the game's playable worlds every 24 hours – though currently there is no questing.

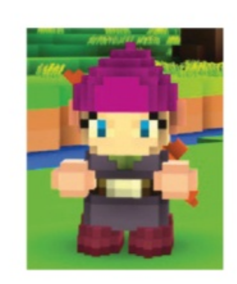
"It's easy to generate random MMOG-style quests such as 'defeat 13 goblins', but it's obviously very generic and repetitive," Von Funck explains. "[Alternatively,] you can combine pre-written sentences or story elements with random items, monsters and so on, [but] this can become too transparent to the player after some time too. Fully authored quests don't have these problems, but they don't work well with a procedurally generated game which is meant to be playable forever. You will simply run out of quests."

In the meantime, then, the focus is on exploration and levelling, though the latter is rather arduous, especially at the start when you're a match for few foes and aggroed enemies chase you down indefinitely. Level up a few times, though, and recruit a pet to help in battle, and there's a pleasant flow to combat, especially in multiplayer when different classes can play to their strengths. Exploration is a delight, however, especially later on when some judiciously spent skill points give access to boats and hang-gliders. Even in your early, underpowered hours with the game, simply wandering these random worlds is a constant thrill – seeing what waits beyond the next blocky hill or body of voxel water – and it's impossible not to marvel at the fact that this is the work of one person. Well, it was: Von Funck's wife, Sarah, joined the project last year. Wolfram focuses mostly on programming, his wife on the art.

There will always be cities and castles, but their location will forever be unique

It's two years since development began, and much has changed. Combat has been overhauled, with the ability to lock on to enemies removed because of Von Funck's love of *Monster Hunter*. A hard-drive failure did for much of his codebase, meaning the entire engine had to be rewritten from scratch – no small task for a lone programmer, but there are no regrets. "I'm actually glad that I coded my own engine," he tells us. "I love to have full control over everything." Everything, that is, except the lie of this beautiful, blocky, randomly crafted land. ■

The game's towns teem with NPCs, including this mute group of children who creepily surrounded us when we set foot in the town square. Fields on the outskirts are valuable sources of food for crafting healing potions



Numbers game

Cube World is already the subject of a busy Wiki – one to which players will need to regularly refer, at least until the Von Funcks finish their work on the game's tutorials. Among the explanations of the game's mechanical details is a database of seed numbers whose worlds will spawn you near to specific items, locations and resources. We're still a good few levels away from being able to take advantage of Seed 23, which spawns you right next to an Ogre. Our previous encounters with these hulking foes haven't gone so well.





Publisher Sony Online Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin US
Release TBC



EVERQUEST NEXT

SOE invites players to build and destroy in its next-gen MMOG

Outlining the problem that *EverQuest Next* seeks to solve, director of development **David Georgeson** takes aim not only at the original game and its sequel, but also the genre they established: the 3D combat-focused RPGs that came to define the term MMOG. "We've been playing a sterile version of Dungeons & Dragons," he tells us, "and it's been that way because we couldn't come up with a better solution."

This is an area of gaming in which slight tweaks to the template are enough to justify costly projects and tremendous risk, and that is what makes *EverQuest Next*'s extraordinary ambitions so notable.

The entire game is rendered using voxels, for a start, which allow for fully destructible environments and for players' actions to cause meaningful damage to the landscape. Dynamic combat AI will force rampaging monsters to react when, say, a mage creates an impassible barrier or blows out a bridge. Alterations will be slowly repaired over time, and players won't be able to destroy everything – the key city of Qeynos, Georgeson points out, "would be a parking lot in a couple of hours" if players were allowed total freedom – but the system adds a sense of responsiveness that isn't present in other RPGs of this type. We're simply not used to the notion that a massive fireball presupposes the existence of a crater.

The basic flow of combat takes cues from the *Guild Wars* series to allow players to mix and match class and weapon abilities that are unlocked as the world is explored. A parkour-style system has also been implemented, allowing player characters to more realistically vault, slide and tumble around the landscape.

Voxels also allow for substantial procedural generation. While the design and layout of the game's surface world will be creatively managed by SOE, players will be able to dig down into *Minecraft*-style substrata to participate in dungeon adventures that are generated on the fly. Voxel-based tools will allow players to build the structures they want, but unlike in the majority of building games the player has the freedom to resize the block brush and smooth edges with a bevel tool. It's more Maya than *Minecraft*.

These tools will be made available later in the year as part of *EverQuest Next Landmark*, a standalone game in which players will claim plots of land and hunt out resources that are used to build structures. Prefabricated buildings can then be sold to other players for real money, or entered into competitions with a chance of being officially included – with a credit – in the final game. It's a massive turnaround: SOE has moved from a period of deep secrecy to an open invitation to all players to help make its game.

> ***"We've been playing sterile D&D because we couldn't think up a better solution"***

The world of *EverQuest Next* will be constantly changing. Monsters will find a place for themselves based on pre-programmed personality traits and will ultimately learn to avoid grinding players. Three-month-long public quests called Rallying Calls will focus attention on an area with long-lasting consequences: the players who help build a new city when the game launches will later have the satisfaction of knowing that they changed it forever.

EverQuest Next is a strident response to the 'sterile Dungeons & Dragons' of the past 20 years. SOE has clearly paid close attention to the type of experience that drew crowds away from the MMOG and made conscious steps to address the balance – and that's laudable. Given the scale of its ambition, however, *EverQuest Next* will need to prove repeatedly that it isn't vapourware, but should it succeed then it suggests, for the first time in years, a genuine future for the MMOG. ■



Soule Music

Veteran composer Jeremy Soule has signed an exclusivity deal with SOE as part of his work on *EverQuest Next*. "The greatest thing about this team is the people," he tells us. "They were able to demonstrate how important it was that ideas are cross-pollinated between music, art and design. As music director I have the freedom to succeed or fail, and I love that. On some projects they'd micromanage the music so much that it'd be stifling." The key, Soule argues, lies in respecting the role of music as distinct from the rest of the soundtrack. "Music," he says, "has a chair at the cabinet level."



***EverQuest Next* runs on a heavily modified version of the Forgelight engine, which has granted the development team access to *Planetside 2*'s lighting. This affects everything from time of day to interior (or subterranean) ambience**

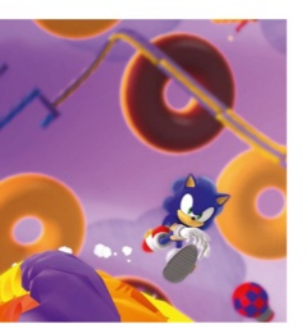


TOP LEFT **Monsters' area-of-effect attacks are telegraphed with red outlines on the ground similar to *Guild Wars 2*. In *EverQuest Next* these blows can collapse scenery or send players tumbling.**
TOP ***EverQuest Next* will use the SOEmote system that allows player facial expressions to be mapped on to their character using a webcam.**
ABOVE **As in *Minecraft*, players will be encouraged to push through the strata in pursuit of resources. This also looks to serve as the basis of the game's dungeon system**

ABOVE **Entrance to the underworld could be staged – an earthquake, or a fissure in the ground – or it could be player-driven. It's possible to simply grab a pick and start digging.**
RIGHT **Cloth and hair physics give characters a sense of belonging in the world. They're affected by wind and movement, and fit naturally into the environment. The exaggerated art style has been controversial with the community, however**



Publisher Sega (Japan, US), Nintendo (EU)
Developer Sonic Team
Format Wii U
Origin Japan
Release October 18



SONIC LOST WORLD

Sonic Team finally catches up in the space race

Disappointed that *Super Mario 3D World* isn't a *Galaxy* game? Sega has you covered. Get past the blatant replication of Nintendo's space-twisting idea and you'll find the *Galaxy* gimmick suits Sonic: that long-standing problem of how to put the zippy hedgehog in a 3D platform game without the player careening off platforms has been solved by the gravitational tug of planetoids where there's literally no edge to fall off.

Yet it's fascinating to see how the adaptive little creature has reshaped his new home. In a *Sonic* game, Mario's spherical planets won't do: instead, our first session with *Lost World* drops us onto a giant, floating cylinder with ends that taper to a dull point. You can run upside down and around the shape, as in *Galaxy*, but without the long, flatter sides the hedgehog wouldn't be able to pick up speed. And even when he does start accelerating, Sonic seems a touch more sluggish than before – an overdue concession, perhaps, to his new 3D environments. His default running speed positively plods, in fact, though if you hold down the right trigger he'll obligingly pick up the pace while semi-automatically clambering over minor obstacles. Hold down the left, meanwhile, and you'll start charging up his signature spin dash.

The level itself is a trickier, enemy- and obstacle-filled gauntlet than anything we saw in *Galaxy*. In fact, we struggle not to injure ourselves when dashing along the sides of the cylinder at full speed. That cylindrical shape lends itself to a multi-route approach, however. One side of the planet opens up into a relatively clear plain, where you can use





TOP Wall running requires you to hold down the R button. Pick up enough speed and you'll glow blue, leaving a trail behind you and, providing you keep jumping, carrying on almost indefinitely. ABOVE It's a pretty-looking game. The green grass and blue sky of Windy Hill Zone are particularly vibrant, while the busier casino-themed environment benefits from the HD clarity lacking in *Sonic Colors*



Apparently, this is set in the Desert Zone. While the game inserts an extra 's' for the obvious pun at the level's outset, we're also told that the forested level with the giant beehives is in the same stage. It seems odd to give levels a specific theme and then ignore it

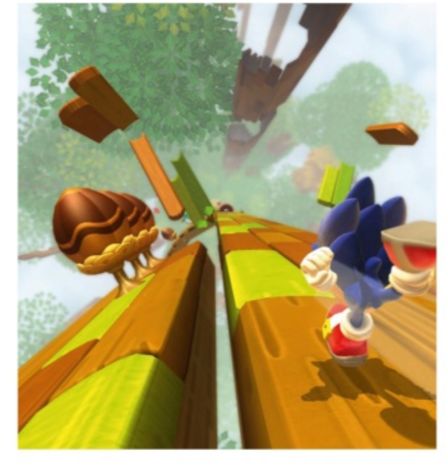


RIGHT **There are some clever perspective tricks here: the presence of skyboxes and background details make it obvious when you're on the underside of one of these platforms, though in this case Sonic appears to be running up the tree.**
BELOW **Sonic has two main attacks: a bouncy homing attack that will potentially send him rebounding onto any other nearby enemy, as well as a kick that can't be chained together so easily but can defeat stronger foes while sending weaker ones flying into their comrades**











Colouring in

There's a host of influences from previous *Sonic* games here, but the most obvious is the presence of the wisp from *Sonic Colors*. The only bit of GamePad touchscreen integration we come across in our demo, activating the laser wisp causes the game to pause while you trace out a trajectory with your finger on the screen below. Activating Sonic with a second swipe makes him hurtle at top speed along the route you laid out for him. There were six wisp types in *Colors*; presumably each will introduce some sort of new touchscreen functionality here.



For all its iconic status, the spin dash seems a little crowded out by Sonic's other new moves. These levels feel designed around the new running pace

Sonic's homing attack to ricochet from enemy to enemy; the other puts Sonic's new parkour abilities to the test, daring you to follow trails of golden rings by wall-running and leaping over spike pits. Harder routes seem to be located on the undersides of planets.

Not all of *Lost World* fits this template. We play one level that requires you to rapidly dash across a perilously thin track with the camera centred behind Sonic. It feels, to start with, not too dissimilar to plenty of other recent 3D *Sonic* games, but then the track suddenly becomes another wraparound tube. The danger switches from falling to your death to slamming face first into it: we have to orient Sonic so that he glides through gaps in oncoming honeycombed walls.

Traditional two-dimensional levels seem to be a large component of *Lost World*, and they're still the place where our hero feels most at home. That lack of a third, complicating axis provides the kind of instant readability you need when you're going to be hurtling through levels at speed, and with enemies obligingly spaced out to send you bouncing onto platforms when you spin-attack them, there's a perfectionist pleasure in revisiting the level we play to whittle down our completion time. That level, incidentally, is made up of pieces of cake and other confectionary floating in a void, which certainly doesn't dispel any associations with *Galaxy*.

The final level we try, however, forgets Mario and turns to Sonic's back catalogue for inspiration. Named Frozen Factory, for reasons so unclear to us it may well be a translation error, this is Casino Night Zone reborn as an open yet linear 3D level. Sonic is perfectly at home here, dodging neon lasers, collecting vast quantities of gold rings and bouncing from bumper to bumper like a ball bearing in a pachinko machine. Or, of course, a pinball table: Frozen Factory makes the latter comparison literal by dropping Sonic into a side-on pinball minigame that could have ripped straight from *Sonic Spinball* before firing him back out into the depths of the Casino – sorry, Factory.

Sonic, slick mascot of Sega's 2D era, has never felt at home in a 3D world. Too fast for environments that required more dawdling than he was accustomed to, yet not acrobatic enough for complex, three-dimensional space, the hedgehog has ricocheted from game to game like he's been stuck in that Casino. *Lost World*'s pick-and-mix approach to level design might suggest that Sonic Team still hasn't found a style of level in which the character snugly fits, but it does suggest the studio is prepared to borrow from the best while working it out. ■







ROUND-UP

BATTLEFIELD 4

Publisher EA **Developer** DICE **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Sweden **Release** November 1 (EU)



***Call Of Duty: Ghosts* hasn't generated the series' usual buzz, so there's a very real opportunity for DICE's *Battlefield 4* to steal a march in the next-gen FPS arms race. Multiplayer is the focus, of course, but we're hoping for significant improvement on *BF3*'s anodyne campaign too. This time the action takes in Russia and China, tasking you with the extraction of a group of VIPs, and allowing DICE to introduce an all-new selection of Chinese military vehicles. Meanwhile, Battlelog will let you set up custom competitive challenges for your friends using a tablet or smartphone, which can also display an interactive tactical map.**

BETRAYER

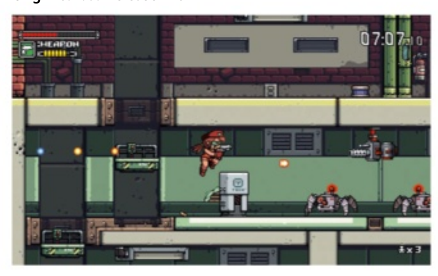
Publisher Black Powder Games **Developer** In-house **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBC



Almost everything about *Betrayer* goes against convention. Its stark look is the most obvious, but the game's austerity extends beyond use of colour. It's set in early colonial-era Virginia, a location that's ripe with story potential. It prizes exploration, with no HUD or objective markers; instead, a listening mechanic alerts you to nearby clues. It has pedigree too: Blackpowder's founders are Monolith veterans with credits including *FEAR* and *No One Lives Forever*.

MERCENARY KINGS

Publisher Tribute Games **Developer** In-house **Format** PC, PS4
Origin Canada **Release** TBC



A first look at Tribute Games' fourplayer *Metal Slug*-alike suggests the idea was better in our heads than in practice. Four-directional fire feels needlessly limiting, *Gears Of War*'s active reload mechanic arbitrary, and Paul Robertson's pixel art has none of the charm of his work on *Scott Pilgrim*.

NIDHOGG

Publisher Messhof **Developer** In-house **Format** PC
Origin US **Release** 2014



Mark Essen's lo-fi twoplayer fencing game *Nidhogg* seems to have been around forever, but will finally see release before the year is out. Online play is promised, as well as multiple stages and a singleplayer component. There are new moves, too, including a wall jump, evasive roll and dive kick.

SNOW

Publisher Poppermost Productions **Developer** In-house
Format PC **Origin** Sweden **Release** 2013



The death of the winter sports game has been one of this console generation's mysteries. At last, some competition for Mario & Sonic's Olympian escapades comes in the form of this free-to-play skiing and snowboarding game, set in a huge, fully explorable open world and running on CryEngine 3.

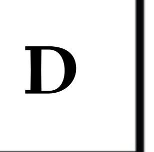


AN AUDIENCE WITH...

MARK CERNY

PlayStation 4's system architect talks about rekindling the innovation of PlayStation's early days, the quest for photorealism, and the heart of next-generation gaming





Depending on your perspective, game industry legend **Mark Cerny** is either a workaholic or a workophile. Since taking on the role of lead system architect for PlayStation 4 in 2008, he's travelled around the world at an exhausting pace consulting with developers to make sure the problems that plagued the launch of PlayStation 3 don't persist. Just to make sure that there isn't a free nanosecond in his schedule, he's also elected to simultaneously direct his own PS4 launch title, *Knack*. Some 30 years on from his beginnings at Atari, where he famously designed and coded *Marble Madness*, his enthusiasm for videogames shows no sign of diminishing.

We talk to him to discuss the ways in which he's seen – and helped – cinematic games evolve since his days at Crystal Dynamics, the sometimes volatile discussions with developers over Sony's plans for PS4, and what's kept him committed to the game industry for three decades of continual change.

When Edge launched in 1993, you were at Crystal Dynamics working on games for the soon-to-be-launched 3DO console. What goes through your mind when you reflect on that period in your career?
Crystal Dynamics was a lot of fun; I think it was probably the most enjoyable place I've ever worked. There was this huge energy. We were all so young, and at the same time we weren't very good at making the games. We had Sega's very bad habit of valuing quantity of titles over quality. We had EA's bad habit of believing that very long technical design documents and game design documents were the proper way to create a game. But it was just fun to be there and make those games.

Tell us about the experience of developing for 3DO.
It wasn't high-powered enough to really let you make the games. *Total Eclipse* ran at between, I think, 8Hz and 14Hz – 8Hz when it got busy. Not really interactive rates. We went and filmed real actors for *Crash 'n' Burn* and our cinematics budget was only $10,000. And then we didn't have a codec we could use to display the movies in, so we had to hand-write something because there was no standardised technology for that. So we ended up having a postage-stamp-sized area of the screen where we showed those cinematics, which probably is about all they deserved. [Cerny points at the *Crash 'n' Burn* screenshot on p55 of issue one of **Edge**.] On this track, if you go back and look, there's a message from me embedded in the left-hand shoulder of the track. There's actually text there. I can't remember all of it, but it included the line, 'The OS for 3DO should've been called the SOS.' This was a console that had 1MB of system memory; at one point, the OS grew to 600K, leaving 400K for games.

Did you feel like you'd been sent out to die?
Well, what they ended up doing was they added another megabyte of memory – brought it up to 2MB – which is one of the reasons why it ended up costing $700 at launch. So it was a struggle, but we had fun.

In the early 1990s, the quest for photorealism had already begun and full-motion video seemed like an obvious way of getting there. Did you feel that way at the time?
[At Crystal Dynamics] we weren't as far ahead as EA was. EA did *Road Rash* with full-blown shoots in exactly the era of the game with professional actors, stunt people and the like. They were really feeling that was the future. As an industry, we have gotten to that story-driven place that we thought we were going to get to; it just took 15 years longer than we thought it would.

Why did it take so long?
In film, no matter how cheap your production is, you have access to emotion because you have access to the human face. But in games, that's the most expensive thing. The human body is the most expensive thing you can try to put in your game – at least a human who looks like a human. So it takes tens of millions of dollars to do what a film can do on many levels for just a few hundred thousand dollars. It took a while for the technology to get to the point where we could really put something compelling in there on the narrative side.

At the PlayStation 4 reveal, Quantic Dream's David Cage stressed that there would be room for more emotional expression in this next generation of hardware, with higher polygon counts. It sounds like you agree.
I'm not sure it comes out in the polygons, but we are at the point in the PlayStation 4 generation where we will sometimes forget that we're looking at computer graphics rather than captured video.



Cerny's work on 3DO helped it to make a reasonable debut, but the platform could not hold out in the face of Sony's PS1

At the point where it's almost indistinguishable, why have this extra layer – motion capture, etc – between actors and the audience?
I don't think it will be indistinguishable. I just think that at times we'll be able to forget, and it will depend on lighting and on the scene. But there will be moments when you forget. I don't think we'll be consistently able to be at that point so if you used video, you really would be drawing attention to the fact that the actors really don't exist in the game's world.

You worked on the first *Uncharted* and have worked closely with Naughty Dog, and you've seen the march towards games that rival the movie world in terms of production values and investment. Do you feel this strand of game development has expanded to a point where it has absorbed too great a focus of the industry?
We are, as an industry, making games of so many different types for such a variety of players that I think that any temporary enthusiasm in one direction or another like that will be just fine. It's true that that is the model for making a game today, but overall games are very healthy. You have that, but at the same time you have *The Witness*.

So do you feel that the videogame ecosystem is sufficiently diverse right now? Is there any genre or approach that you would like to see better represented?
I feel like the magical time was the early years of the PlayStation, because there was such a variety of products coming out. There wasn't this sort of consistent overarching pattern that you might have seen in the last few years in the PlayStation 3 generation, and I really think we're heading back to that time, and I think that's a very good thing.

What do you see that will enable that return?
This is ancient history, but if you look at arcade games around 1980-82, the largest company was Atari, and it had this philosophy that if it had ever been done before in any form, you could not do it again because that would be insufficiently creative. So the era's a bit wrong, but if anybody had ever made a *Street Fighter*, you couldn't make a one-on-one fighting game, and so every game you created you had to have new controls, a new concept. It needed to be an explosion of creativity, and I think much of what players felt about the arcades when they went in there in [that period] was because of this philosophy that Atari had; but it was by no means the general industry philosophy.

Who in Atari management was setting that mandate?
Nolan Bushnell was long gone at this point. It was coming down from Lyle Rains, one of the unsung heroes of arcade games, and Dan Van Elderen and the other very senior management – they must have been in their early 30s but they seemed senior to us – of Atari Games. If we look at the early years of the PlayStation, it had the same feeling. There was no rulebook, teams were small, projects were cheap: you could make a game for just a couple hundred thousand dollars. So you saw things like *Xi* [aka *Devil Dice*], a game with character that runs around on rolling dice, and *Intelligent Qube* – these were just somebody's ideas of what a game could be. They finished them, they put them on sale, and they sold. It wasn't the case where people are talking about how the middle of the market is dropping out a bit today, it wasn't the case where these games were made and did not succeed. Some of these games were made by tiny teams with tiny budgets, and went on to be phenomenally successful.

So that's the goal, to create an environment in which all these different kinds of games can thrive. How will PS4 help restore that balance?
The barrier to entry that existed on PS3 technologically is gone. If you can make games for PC, you can make games for PS4. So it's much easier to bring games to the platform, or if you're going to do it on the platform, it's once again much easier. On the business side, we've really challenged our approach towards smaller titles, I think successfully. I wasn't kidding in my [Develop keynote]: your journey as an indie developer on PS4 really does start by tweeting Shahid Ahmad [@shahidkamal]. That's the way we do business now. And I think that [a number of the aspects of] the broader user experience that surrounds the games really do help the indie. When you like a game and you share it, that's going to be a very natural thing to do on the platform, and if your friend is playing some quirky little title, you're going to see that. It will be up on Facebook, it will be on UStream, you'll see it. And the idea that you'd be playing a downloadable title, that gets a lot easier.

In terms of the self-publishing spectrum, you have Apple's philosophy at one end – which allows a mass of titles through and lets natural selection weed out the junk – and Nintendo at the other, which wants to maintain the strictest possible curation of new content. How did you determine where PS4's approach would fall along that continuum?
Well, technologically speaking the barrier is gone so that was my design side of it. Using the supercharged PC architecture made it much more possible to have titles like *Octodad* on it, which I just love the concept of. So I think we can have a platform and, at the same time, we can find these gems and elevate their visibility within the PlayStation universe. This is our consistent philosophy across pretty much everything we do, and Shu Yoshida has been very inspirational here.

We do not tend to have a ruleset when developers are involved. We have aspirations, we have ideas that we like to share, and things that we'd like to see, but we put them out there and then we let the developers create whatever they feel like they would like to create. So we make a controller and it has all these inputs on it. We don't mandate that you use any of them, but we do of course talk to developers and share our vision for how we think all of these could be used. Whatever section [of the business] you look at, it's the same approach: we put it out there for the development community for them to adopt.





Cerny was just a kid when he entered the game industry, joining Atari's coin-op division in 1982 at the age of 17 and designing the arcade classic *Marble Madness* shortly after. A job developing titles for Sega's Master System took him to Tokyo in the mid-'80s, where he became fluent in Japanese. Upon returning to the US, he worked for Crystal Dynamics on 3DO launch titles. During the early PlayStation era, he led the initiative to program a common graphics engine, and as head of Universal Interactive Studios, signed now-heavyweight studios such as Naughty Dog and Insomniac. Today he serves as the lead system architect of PlayStation 4.

Let's talk about the postmortems for the PlayStation 3 hardware. When we spoke to Guerrilla Games about this process, the team mentioned faxing detailed design documents back and forth over weekends. How do you maintain this level of intensity seven days a week, and how much did you have to vary your method studio by studio?
The difficulty is, you don't want to have the kind of meeting – Adam Boyes calls this 'tea and crumpets' – where you're drinking a cup of tea and you've got your pinky out and you're discussing the issues perfectly calmly. You want passion. You want people who care deeply about what's going on who really show it, and



What was it? This landmark, genre-defining game was awarded a 6 due to an error during the production of **E105**, the same issue in which *Halo* became the fourth **Edge** 10.

it means that the valuable conversations are the most difficult conversations to have because somebody who's passionate about the game they want to make is telling you that what you're doing is hindering that or making it impossible to make it or more expensive to make it or more cumbersome in some way. So it isn't just the travel. It's that when you get off that plane and you sit down in that ideal meeting, you're getting full-force feedback.

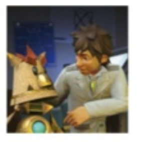
You've mentioned being jeered by a room full of developers. What got that particular group so riled up?
This is where the developer-driven process saves us. We had had a number of conversations and come to a conclusion that, on balance, we were best going forward with a certain strategy. I walked it around with the full knowledge that people might not be in love with it – but what I didn't realise is that I would get booed in a meeting. And of course we ended up changing things and heading in a completely different direction.

The most difficult part of this process for me is that certain choices we make will make it a little bit harder to make games. Now when I get pushback for that, is it a real issue or is it just something that makes it slightly more difficult [to ship your game]? To give an example, 'play as you download' is something that we believe in, and that requires technology work to be done to support it. Is it acceptable for us to ask the development community to universally support this? And so the issue there is separating the 'it's something we can handle, but it will take some time on the implementation side' versus 'no, this is something that's between us and the games we want to create'. Now, 'play as you download' is there because it's not the latter, it's something where the development community broadly feels that they can support this feature, and it isn't getting in the way of your favourite game director creating his or her next game.

The budgets of top-tier cinematic games have escalated to previously unthinkable levels. Do you feel the model is sustainable, or will things have to change at some point?
If we grow the console audience with this next generation of consoles, then I think a lot becomes possible. How many people like to play games? One billion, two billion? If we look at how many people have purchased consoles in this generation – that's a few hundred million – the question, when we look at consoles within the larger world of gaming, becomes: what place do they occupy? And if they are something where that joy of play that I'm talking about is really recognised by that larger audience that brings people in, then anything becomes possible.

Some people assert that closed consoles no longer make sense. How do you justify their continued relevance?
Because their spec doesn't change over the years, consoles are this marvellously stable target that developers can engineer against. Something like a *Final Fantasy* game takes a certain number of years to make, and I believe that it's because the target is a fixed spec that it becomes possible for them to create such a thing. And then players really respond to where the games are that they want to play.

What did you *personally* want out of the PS4 as a game designer and engine programmer that you were, selfishly, free to champion from your post as system architect?
Well, as a programmer myself, I wanted to be sure that there were lots of fun little features in the hardware that people could really explore in the later years of the console lifecycle. So when it came down to designing the feature set for years three and four of the console, that isn't something where the development community could contribute as broadly because it had much more to do with a personal vision about where GPGPU was going. I definitely did pitch it to a broad variety of teams and get their feedback, but there were many, many small and large decisions that had to be made in terms of actually creating the details of that hardware.


With much of the PS4 launch lineup catering to the tastes of older users, Cerny conceived *Knack* as a way to fill the space for a family-friendly title

Hardware generation cycles have lengthened considerably. When you were locking in specs for PS4, what kind of time horizon were you budgeting for?
There are definitely some features in the PlayStation 4 that will start to get used broadly in the third or fourth year of the console lifecycle. It's all about how the GPU and CPU can work together to do tasks other than graphics – photorealism is a great target but world simulation is also important. This is underappreciated, but getting your audio right in a game and making sure that your character's ears are really hearing what they should within the game universe takes a tremendous amount of processing power. And there are a lot of features in the GPU to support asynchronous fine-grain computing. 'Asynchronous' is just saying it's not directly related to graphics, 'fine grain' is just saying it's a whole bunch of these running simultaneously on the GPU. So I think we're going to see the benefits of that architecture around 2016 or so.


PS4 hardware specs are locked in but Cerny claims the user interface will continue to undergo refinements up until its late-2013 launch

Is that as far forward as you're able to reasonably forecast?
There are still people who are making Atari 2600 games today so learning, on some level, never stops. With the PlayStation 4, the share cores have a beautiful instruction set and can't be programmed in assembly – if you were willing to invest the time, you could do some incredibly efficient processing on the GPU for graphics or for anything else. But the timeframe for that kind of work would not be now. I don't even think it would be three years from now.

Nintendo probably has the most coherent identity of any firstparty publisher, with confectionary colour palettes, childlike themes and so on. Microsoft has come to be regarded as the home of shooters, partly through the success of *Halo* and the 360 controller's triggers. What do you think is Sony's gaming identity?

It was... *Grand Theft Auto III*. In **E**106, the Recently Reviewed rundown of the previous issue's scores listed the game as an 8. It's a mistake that has, mercifully, never been repeated.

I think it's about the variety of experiences on the platform. As I said before, I'm very proud of the titles Sony has published over the years (that I don't think would've found a home somewhere else) and with the relationships, as well with thirdparty publishers and developers that bring our experiences to the platform. With PlayStation 3, that's a platform that has both *Journey* and *The Last Of Us* on it – and those are very, very different kinds of experiences.

What features do you think will define the coming generation of console hardware?
I think we're going to see heightened social integration in games, and that can take a lot of different forms. If you went to Ubisoft's [E3] press conference, there were all these cases where they were sort of blurring the line between what was a singleplayer game and what was a multiplayer game. *Knack* is a singleplayer game, but you also see your other friends in it as you're playing the game. There are treasure chests with random items that let you build gadgets, and you can either choose the one [you find], or you see a list of all your friends who've been to the same secret room and you can choose what they picked up instead. That is a smaller feature but it makes you feel like you're on an adventure with your real-world friends. So I think we're going to see that heightened level of social interaction across games.

I think we'll also see 'living software' – and this was also possible in the PlayStation 3 generation – where every time you play a game there's something new: places to explore, missions, and so on. That is one of the more exciting things that having a hard drive in every PlayStation 4 supports.

"I WANTED THERE TO BE LOTS OF FUN LITTLE FEATURES IN THE PS4 HARDWARE THAT PEOPLE COULD REALLY EXPLORE IN THE LATER YEARS"

When you reflect on your three decades in the videogame industry, what do you consider your most enduring contribution to date?
In the 1990s we were really in a bad place in terms of game development. We had somehow come to the conclusion that a game was something that could be planned. So the standard way of making a game was, first, to compile a 200-page document saying what the game would be. Those documents would never last more than a month, but still we thought we needed to do it.

And we'd also lost touch with consumers: it was standard in [the early 1990s] not to even have someone play the game prior to launch. You'd just play it in the office and you'd hand it to a professional tester. So when I look back, I'm very proud of how I and a few others really worked to find a better way to do all of that, a more flexible way of making games that acknowledged that much of what we love to experience as players can't be planned or structured. You need to at least have an understanding of what the player's experience will be like as you're planning it. You have freedom, of course. You can be Jonathan Blow with *Braid* and say, "I am making this game where every level is different and you're going to have to learn"; or you can be the *Portal* team, which used substantial usability testing in the process of making the game and made sure that every lesson in there was built up brick by brick from the previous lessons. We pioneered a new style of development, used a new production methodology in titles like *Crash Bandicoot* and *Spyro*. You can see how lasting the impact of that has been.

How did you help to introduce that new method?
In 1997, we built a test room for *Crash Bandicoot 2* where we could sit down with consumers and do a play test. We quickly realised we needed partitions between people, because they tend to look at each other's monitors. You can see that room at pretty much any publisher and many developers today, because we came to the realisation that it's not about having somebody play the game for an hour and then asking them some questions about what they'd like to see in the game. It's about the full experience. Do people understand it? When are they enjoying themselves with the game? When are they just working their way through the challenges? That is now a standardised way of development. I'll go for a meeting at one of these publishers today and I'll see a bunch of 20-somethings, and I immediately know that [they] are going to do a playtest. In contrast, *Crash 'n' Burn* was played one time prior to shipping the game. We were launching day and date with the 3DO hardware, so we finished our all-nighter and handed it off to somebody, they played it once, they gave us some feedback, we changed a few numbers and shipped it. We've come a long way since then.

You've worked extensively in both the US and Japan. How distinct are these two development communities today?
Development is very, very different in Japan. Japanese consumers are very analytical so if you have a particular genre, there are going to be subgenres and sub-subgenres. As a development team you run into issues like, oh, we can't do that because that's not how this is treated in this subgenre. Innovating in that environment is very, very tricky. On the one hand, Japan's development method can make some of the best fighting games that have ever been made, but [on the other], it really does hinder the evolution of games.

With computer programming being such a portable discipline, what's kept you committed to working in games for so many years?
I took a very different path because I decided I wanted to do a large variety of things and also contribute to many different kinds of projects. The way I work is not the way most people work. I'm usually on tour for games and I'll do design and production, so it's very fun. One of the big benefits is [when] I get tired of doing programming for game X, then I'm probably doing design for game Y. I just go do that for a couple of weeks. ■





THE TEN BEST CONSOLES

The big players send out their champions for a countdown of the greatest gameboxes from the past 20 years

10. DREAMCAST



Origin *Japan* ***Release*** *1998*

The short lifespan of Sega's Dreamcast – all but dead within two years – is made all the more tragic by the company's final console providing much of the blueprint for modern machines. It was the first with a built-in modem, for one thing, Sega putting its dwindling money where its mouth was with the likes of *ChuChu Rocket!*, *Phantasy Star Online* and thirdparty efforts such as *Quake III Arena*. In-game voice chat allowed Dreamcast owners to experience the same kind of online play as PC owners, and some games even offered DLC. The controller might have been an ugly evolution of Saturn's 3D controller, but placing a VMU into one of its expansion slots provided a second-screen experience long before the idea became fashionable.

The off-white box that would ultimately force Sega out of the hardware race also delivered the first games that could meaningfully be described as arcade perfect, including excellent ports of *Crazy Taxi*, *Virtua Tennis* and *F355 Challenge*, and even made amends for one of Saturn's misdemeanours with a vastly improved version of *Daytona USA*. But it wasn't just a home for conversions: *Jet Set Radio*, *Shenmue* and *Rez* saw Sega at the height of its creativity despite ailing fortunes, and let's not forget that the platform was home to *Metropolis Street Racer*, the spiritual precursor to *Project Gotham Racing*.

Sega's console was undoubtedly ahead of its time, and it suffered at retail for that reason, despite a strong – and costly – promotional campaign. But its influence can still be felt today, going alongside all those indelible memories of making crazy money against the backdrop of Sega's patented blue skies.

What was it? This one-off 2000 London gaming event featured appearances from industry luminaries such as Phil Harrison, J Allard, Peter Molyneux and Dave Perry.

9. XBOX



Origin *US* ***Release*** *2001*



In many ways, Xbox picked up where Dreamcast left off. Ridiculous controller, online play as standard, a launch lineup with a selection of Sega exclusives... and in the end, not enough people bought it. But where Sega's cash ran out, Microsoft's bottomless pockets made Xbox a platform from which to launch 360. Xbox didn't represent Dreamcast's tragic end but rather a stuttering beginning for the next decade of gaming.

Microsoft built its first console for the future, and threw in a hard drive and network adapter long before most game developers were ready to embrace them. Xbox was launched into a world in which broadband Internet was in its infancy, but by 2005 the notion of a console without an Ethernet adapter was absurd. *Halo 2*, *PGR 2*, *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* and *Rainbow Six 3* made the strongest possible case against the scepticism that greeted Microsoft's ambition. By the generation's end, the company's message was clear: if you wanted to play with friends, you needed an Xbox. Microsoft owned online gaming. Moreover, it owned firstperson shooters. *TimeSplitters* and *Killzone* were largely unconvincing answers to *Halo*, *Riddick*, *Wolfenstein* and a world of online-ready Tom Clancy games on Xbox.

Friends lists built up over the console's four years were carried over to the next generation, players' *Halo* expertise migrated neatly to *Call Of Duty 2* – and 13 years later every console is built to Xbox standards. Xbox was a PC disguised as a console, and when the next generation begins it will see a PlayStation-branded PC face off against an Xbox-branded PC – 2014's consoles defined by a lump of a black box from 2001.

8. WII





Origin *Japan* ***Release*** *2006*

Nintendo shelved its pre-launch Wii codename 'Revolution' because it was cumbersome to pronounce, but the label remains instructive. It reminds us that Nintendo intended for its console to buck the status quo. The console toppled the prevailing logic of console development by opting out of the HD graphical arms race. Instead, Nintendo would bet on the persuasive power of well-designed game mechanics, a novel method of interaction – motion control via the Wii Remote – and the belief that more intuitive controls would welcome a broader consumer audience to the table.

They did. *Wii Sports* would replace *Super Mario Bros* as the best-selling game of all time. Mainstream news ran stories about *Wii Sports* bowling tournaments in retirement homes. Videogames coaxing children off the couch and onto their feet was a PR manager's dream, and gave kids a new bargaining chip with non-gamer parents. The console offered something different, and though many seasoned players would grow disaffected with the device and the company that made it, the first sight of the Wii Remote in action felt almost futuristic.

Since its specs lagged so far behind those of 360 and PS3, there was no way for developers to port ambitious titles to Wii without releasing a demonstrably inferior version. Given the vast installed base, shovelware poured in to fill the void. Yet there were diamonds to be found among the considerable rough. Wii gave the world *Skyward Sword*, *Super Mario Galaxy* and its sequel, and for those alone, never mind its other achievements, its place in console history is assured.

7.
PLAYSTATION 3



Origin *Japan* ***Release*** *2006*

At launch, PlayStation 3 was the game-console equivalent of '80s arena rock: a glorious exercise in overkill. The Cell processor was pitched as if Sony engineers had forged its silicon components from ore contained within some recently unearthed Martian obelisk. Sony was on top of the world, coming off the back of PlayStation 2, which remains the best-selling videogame console in history. The company felt bulletproof.

PlayStation 3 was expensive – so expensive that its chief architect, Ken Kutaragi, told aspiring owners to get a second job so that they might be able to afford one – and its launch model enormous. Perhaps you feel that these are reasons to walk the console up to the edge of this list and push it screaming over the precipice, but here's the thing: Sony set out to make a luxury item. This console was built to be the biggest, the best, most muscular console on the market, and it was all of those things. Anyone who's played *Uncharted 2* remembers the sense of amazement that such a console game was even possible.

Sony has suffered grave financial misfortunes for its conceit with PlayStation 3, but that doesn't mean we can't appreciate the fruits of that hubris. History will remember Giant Enemy Crabs and the PSN hack, of course, but PlayStation 3's legacy will be most defined by its diverse, brilliant catalogue of games. Games like *Demon's Souls*, *The Last Of Us*, *PixelJunk Shooter*, *Journey* and *Metal Gear Solid 4*. Speaking of that final example, anyone who can appreciate the self-indulgence of Kojima's oeuvre will similarly recognise that Sony's console will be remembered with a sense of admiring bafflement.

6.

DS LITE



Origin Japan **Release** 2006

Apple may be synonymous with touchscreen gaming today, but Nintendo delivered the proof of concept back in 2004. Early advertising latched on to that innovation and piled on the erotic subtext. One of the first TV ads had a sultry female voice pleading, "Touch the bottom rectangle... please. Go ahead, touch it. You might like it". The suggestive slogan – 'Touching is good' – would prove a more awkward fit in a *Nintendogs* ad, but nothing could halt the ascent of what would become the best-selling handheld of all time.

The touchscreen revolution had arrived, and the public greeted it with wallets wide open. Nintendo launched its DS in North America ahead of Japan, so it was available for the post-Thanksgiving shopping frenzy in late November. By year's end the console had shipped nearly three million units worldwide. Today, that number has climbed north of 150 million.

A handheld console with two discrete displays. If you try hard enough, you can remember the initial gut-level confusion: why two? What Nintendo did with the DS hardware took vision. It was hardly an obvious choice.

Developers took advantage of its possibilities. The stylus allowed for precision input, which has been lost to Apple's 'sausage stylus' paradigm. There was something gratifying about sliding out the stylus, chewing its tip as you pondered a *Professor Layton* game. Tracing the path for Link's boomerang in *Phantom Hourglass* felt sublime. And the battery life was amazing. You could take it with you on a day trip and leave the charger at home. It was the perfect handheld. Maybe it still is.

5.

GAMECUBE



Origin Japan **Release** 2001

That purple might have been more conspicuous than it was tasteful, but even a questionable colour scheme couldn't detract from what is arguably the most appealing console design of the past two decades. Nintendo's GameCube was perfectly formed, striking a remarkable aesthetic balance between toy and desirable tech: deceptively powerful silicon housed within a squat little box that sports a playful carry handle; buttons that sit perfectly flush with its top; a lid mechanism so satisfying that you'll occasionally open it for no other reason than to feel it click shut again.

Its distinctive controller might not have had the impact on games its predecessors did, but those curved triggers and prominent A button contributed to a pad that felt like it was tailored to your hands alone. The console can't match N64's **Edge** 10s or Wii's commercial success, but it represents a period of creativity and quality Nintendo hasn't been able to rekindle since. Games such as *Luigi's Mansion*, *Super Mario Sunshine* and *Wind Waker*, squeezed onto those 8cm discs, saw a company fearlessly experimenting with cherished series and characters in a way it largely hasn't since – thanks, ironically, to the conservative tastes of those it sought to delight.

It was an infectious ethos, however, as thirdparty developers pushed their own boundaries with the likes of *Resident Evil 4*, *Killer7* and the note-perfect *Super Monkey Ball*. Divisive it may be, and certainly not as cool as many of the consoles on this list, but GameCube delivered entertainment in spades. And isn't that what you want from a console?

4. NINTENDO 64



Origin *Japan* ***Release*** *1996*

Wii and DS may have captured the hearts and wallets of the public, but it was Nintendo's N64 that truly set in motion the company's experimentation with input devices. The console's three-pronged controller gave the world the analogue stick in the context of a game console, which has had a more profound impact on the way games are designed and played than even the DS touchscreen and the Wii Remote. In many ways, Nintendo's 64bit hardware defined 3D console gaming.

And the 3D platformer, too. PlayStation's esoteric *Jumping Flash!* may have come first, but N64 launch title *Super Mario 64* set the template that scores of others would follow. Nintendo would repeat the trick with the much-delayed *Ocarina Of Time*, which has proven as influential within the company as *Mario 64* has on everyone else. While Nintendo has consistently sought to reinvent the *Mario* series, Link's adventures have adhered to the *Ocarina* formula for a reason: it is the work of genius.

Indeed, N64 had as profound an effect on Nintendo's own practices as its controller did on the industry at large. As thirdparties flocked to PlayStation, Nintendo was more reliant than ever on firstparty games – a rule that has held ever since. The company's prized external asset was Rare, delivering some of the best N64 surprises, from *GoldenEye* to *Banjo-Kazooie*, *Blast Corps* to *Perfect Dark*. The $375m Microsoft paid for the studio may seem a lot given its lacklustre Xbox 360 output, but Rare was pivotal in the life of a console which defined how the modern Nintendo works. That is: entirely to its own agenda, the desire to please consumers as strong today as it was when a decision was made to give N64 four controller ports as standard.

What were they? Of all the games reviewed within the pages of **Edge**, only two have ever been deemed poor enough to warrant the miserable rating of 1.

3. PLAYSTATION



Origin *Japan* ***Release*** *1994*

PlayStation was the right console with the right games at the right moment. Sony built a 3D-capable console, made it thirdparty-friendly, and sold it at the right price to 20-somethings who were ready to grow out of *Super Mario Kart* and into *Ridge Racer*.

For the first time, console games were for grown-ups. Sony took *Wipeout* clubbing, *Resident Evil* wore its 18 certificate like a badge of honour, *Tomb Raider* was a pop-culture phenomenon and *Final Fantasy VII* was the best movie ever made as a game. Sony had *Metal Gear Solid*, *Silent Hill*, *Medal Of Honor*, *Syphon Filter*, *PaRappa The Rapper*, *Driver*, *Tekken* and *Grand Theft Auto* – games about guns, cars, music and blood-curdling horror. Sega gave up on Saturn; Nintendo put *Diddy Kong Racing* on shelves one month before Sony released *Gran Turismo*. The world had changed, and only PlayStation was ready for it.

Tabloid newspapers covered PlayStation games, and Lara Croft starred on the covers of lifestyle magazines. It's a cliché to say that PlayStation made gaming cool, but in reality it was more a case of PlayStation *games* being cool. For almost a decade, every thirdparty game that mattered came to Sony's machine. Enthusiasts raved about *Vib Ribbon*, casual console players – all but invented by Sony – made *FIFA* a post-pub game, kids played *Crash Bandicoot* and nagged their parents for *Resident Evil 2*. Sony built a platform on which arcade ports, original games and niche projects could shine. Is it any surprise that PS4 is looking back to move forward? PlayStation was for all players, for all developers, for everyone.

2. XBOX 360



Origin *US* ***Release*** *2005*

Xbox 360 has been the industry's benchmark for eight years, and no console has ever burned so brightly for so long. In many ways it followed PlayStation's lead, hitting every sweet spot required for success. It had its own social network, cross-game chat, new indie games every week, and the best version of just about every multiformat game. Ask any thirdparty console developer about their lead platform and they'd invariably give the same response: Xbox 360.

In a generation with few thirdparty exclusives to separate them, 360 still places ahead of PS3. *Killzone* is no *Halo* and nowadays *Gran Turismo* is no *Forza*, but it's not about the exclusives – there's nothing to trump Naughty Dog's PS3 output, after all. Rather, it's about the choices Microsoft made back in the original Xbox's lifetime. The PC-like architecture meant those early EA Sports titles ran at 60fps compared to only 30 on PS3, Xbox Live meant every dedicated player had an existing friends list, and *Halo* meant Microsoft had *the* killer next-generation exclusive. And when developers demo games on PC now they do it with a 360 pad – another industry benchmark, and a critical one.

There were hardware problems, of course, but Microsoft spent a billion dollars repairing and replacing broken machines, escaped the PR disaster largely unscathed, and got almost every other decision and message right. Now, at the end of the generation, it seems to have lost its way thanks to distractions, but for eight years it's been the best place to play the best games in arguably the best console generation ever.

They were... Genki/Lightweight Xbox fighter *Kabuki Warriors* ("weak, pointless") and PC racer *FlatOut 3: Chaos & Destruction* ("a pitiable assembly of mismatched parts").

1. PLAYSTATION 2



***Origin** Japan **Release** 2000*

One look at the pop charts will tell you sales are rarely an accurate measure of quality, but PlayStation 2 is an exception to that rule. The highest-selling videogame console of all time – 155 million and counting – is also the best system the industry has ever seen. It may not have produced a single **Edge** 10, and its firstparty exclusives may not have had the raw system-selling clout of its generational rivals, but the breadth, depth and quality of its software – all 3,800 games – may never be surpassed.

Ask ten people for their PS2 top fives and you'll get a different list from each of them. The console showcased Japanese development at its absolute peak, before its vision was shattered by the schizophrenic desire to appeal to western audiences it neither knew nor understood. Fumito Ueda (*Ico*, *Shadow Of The Colossus*), Hideki Kamiya (*Okami*) and Keita Takahashi (*Katamari Damacy*) delivered games for the ages; genre specialists like Team Persona refined and reinvented. They were at it in the west, too: Harmonix with *Guitar Hero*, Sony's London Studio with *SingStar* and, of course, Rockstar with the 3D *GTA*s.

This was the last great hurrah of the pure videogame console, the apex of a period before the proliferation of online and media services, before microtransactions and DLC, and before the HD era's development costs gave rise to a new culture of risk aversion. It's hard to imagine a console ever again amassing such a lead over its peers, its huge installed base empowering such unfettered experimentation and creativity. Whatever the next 20 years may bring, PlayStation 2 will forever deserve to be treasured – and in the meantime it stands as the finest videogame console ever released.



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THE TEN AMENDMENTS

Hindsight helps us to see that a handful of games were deserving of our highest possible review score. Let history be rewritten as we do justice to seven new (old) 10s

GOLDENEYE 007

Publisher *Nintendo* ***Developer*** *Rare* ***Format*** *Nintendo 64* ***Release*** *1997*

Facility, pistols, Man With The Golden Gun. Stack, slappers, Licence To Kill. Every group of *GoldenEye* players had their multiplayer setup of choice – a far cry from today's standardised deathmatch and team objective gametypes. Because this was a game played in localised groups, the same players huddled round the same CRT screen night after night, focusing intently on their personal quadrant of the display. (For the most part, anyway: here, success meant dividing your attention between all four corners of the screen so you could see where your enemies were headed – 1997's low-tech take on the UAV radar.)

In an era still only warming to the Internet, there were no leaderboard titans, no wikis or forums sharing and refining strategies. There were just the nightly champions of each after-school club, student house and post-pub gathering, each with their own take on *GoldenEye* best practice. The king of the house felt like the king of the world, but it was when these groups collided that the real magic happened. One **Edge** staffer recalls how he and his student housemates visited another London townhouse confident that their run-and-gun play was unbeatable, only to find that their opponents were playing a different game. They worked in little nooks and crannies with previously unknown lines of sight, in plenty of cover. They had, to all intents and purposes, invented camping.



There are many remarkable things about *GoldenEye*'s multiplayer. It's almost impossible to believe Rare's telling of its creation, that it wasn't planned and was cobbled together six weeks before deadline day. One of its greatest achievements is how well it suits the licence, particularly in an era where the word 'licensed' so frequently flowed into 'shovelware'. Gametypes were plucked from Bond's back catalogue and made perfect sense. You Only Live Twice was self-explanatory; Licence To Kill meant a single bullet spelt death; Man With The Golden Gun gave that same power to a single weapon that respawned on its bearer's death. Bond and co were smartly implemented, too: Jaws' bulk made him a softer target than his intimidating frame suggested, and while we know of many who banned the diminutive Oddjob, we knew better. Prowl a map's upper levels and you had an easy headshot as soon as he set foot on the stairs.



A pared-down HUD and an angular Pierce Brosnan: both revolutionary, though the latter less resistant to the ravages of time

THERE WERE NO LEADERBOARD TITANS, JUST THE CHAMPIONS OF EACH POST-PUB GATHERING

The singleplayer mode gave much to the firstperson shooter. There were stealth elements (and guards who ran for alarms to call in reinforcements) and gadgets too – the wristwatch magnet that sucked a prison cell key from an opposite wall, and the laser that burned an escape hatch in the floor of a train. It limited Bond to carrying three weapons at a time, but let him wield two of them at once. It had the sparsest of HUDs, showing only your ammo count, with everything else squirrelled away in Bond's wristwatch pause menu. It was endlessly replayable, too, its levels learned like the back of your hand until you reached the real long game: racing through them to frighteningly tight time limits, on the hardest difficulty, to unlock cheats.

Like many games of its era, *GoldenEye* hasn't aged so well visually. The ground beneath your feet looks like a single 100-pixel texture has been stretched across the entire stage, every outdoor section is shrouded in heavy fog, and the polygonal Brosnans, Beans and Coltranes that once inspired wonder now induce chuckles. But the magic endures. Let your eyes adjust and it's an easier game than you remember, its enemies witless, the auto-aim wonderfully generous. And then it hits you: we weren't just learning a game back then, but an entire language – one in which we're now fluent, because it's modern videogaming's mother tongue. *GoldenEye* is a seminal piece of work, the first great console FPS and, in local multiplayer, the last one, too.



What was it? This seminal shooter was awarded 7 in issue seven of **Edge**, the review concluding: "If only you could talk to these creatures… Now, that *would* be interesting".

ADVANCE WARS

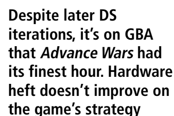
Publisher *Nintendo* ***Developer*** *Intelligent Systems* ***Format*** *Game Boy Advance* ***Release*** *2001*

Anyone who hasn't played Intelligent Systems' strategy games would never think it important that they have great rhythm. But they all do, and none with as consummate a tempo as *Advance Wars*. It permeates the whole game: in the jaunty slap bass and electric guitar of its attract sequence, the snap of the cursor as it moves between tiles, and the sweeping transition into units' animated exchanges of fire. *Advance Wars* presents one of the unsung greats of interface design – playful, clear and an ideal complement to the game's taut, finely balanced strategy. So clear that you always know the outcome of an individual skirmish and the exact attack ranges of every unit.



But *Advance Wars'* secret is that such certainties wilt under the complexity that explodes from its few, exquisitely honed working parts. The rock-paper-scissors strengths, weaknesses and properties of its 18 air, ground and sea units – every one essential, every one perilously vulnerable if not carefully manoeuvered. The logistical problem of keeping units stocked with ammo and fuel, and the economics of capturing factories and cities to keep cash – and therefore new units – flowing. The tactics in exploiting unit visibility (and not getting hit yourself by a missile launcher lurking in a forest), of knowing the advantages in battling on open plains and movement-sapping closed mountains, and in the careful use of bottlenecks to undermine an enemy's advantage. The special skills of the CO you've chosen to play as, and those of your foe. No consideration of your strengths comes without knowing that your opponent likely has them, too.





Despite later DS iterations, it's on GBA that *Advance Wars* had its finest hour. Hardware heft doesn't improve on the game's strategy

WE COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN WHEN IT WAS RELEASED THAT ADVANCE WARS WOULD NEVER BE IMPROVED UPON

Only the very best strategy games understand what *Advance Wars* does – that they're puzzle games driven by the results of your own decisions. That's what makes every game so utterly absorbing: the initial rush to capture and hold cities and the first testing engagements; later, the slow realisation of victory emerging from the chaos of battle, and the desire to remember how it unfolded to comprehend where and how it turned. It's The Art Of War played out in 240×160 colourful pixels, and though unforgiving, *Advance Wars* is only cruel if you fail to understand its nuances.

Almost none of this was new to *Advance Wars* itself, which was built on six previous games that had only been released in Japan. But it did add CO Powers, which steadily charge with time and through attacks. Their benefits are subtle. Andy's repairs two points of damage on every unit, a godsend to new players, but Sami's Double Time, which boosts infantry range (ideal for capturing cities en masse), is perhaps the pro's choice. CO Powers' genius lies in their ability to change the pace of a battle without transforming its fortunes; they're crucial, but not game-changers.

We couldn't have known when it was released that *Advance Wars* would never be improved upon, though we suspected it. *Dual Strike*'s attempt to beef up CO Powers, add new units and layer an air battle over the ground were ugly and unwieldy, sapping the original's purity. *Days Of Ruin*'s emo-inflected apocalypse forgot the appeal and innocence of *Advance Wars'* tale of kids leading armies and introduced a dark story that felt out of step with the series. And since it's already so precise, fast and beautiful, you can hardly imagine *Advance Wars* benefitting from more advanced technology, whether 3D or touch interfaces. Other than online multiplayer, anyway.

The ensuing 12 years have proven that *Advance Wars* is one of the rarest treasures in interactive entertainment. Its balance of simplicity and deep tactics is still utterly engrossing and rewarding, and hasn't been bettered. It is, quite simply, a perfect game.

It was... *Doom*, from id Software. There was ebullient praise, however, for the game's graphics: "There are some visual touches in this game that will literally blow your mind." Mmm.

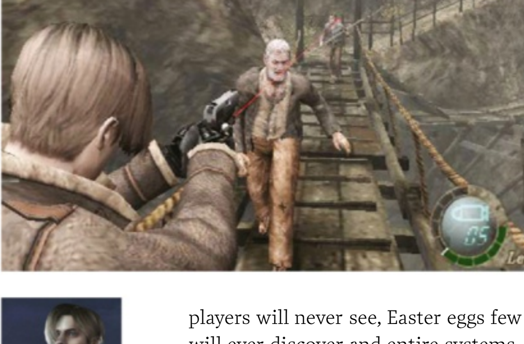
RESIDENT EVIL 4

Publisher *Capcom* **Developer** *In-house* **Original format** *GameCube* **Release** *2004*

Stand your ground. That's the point. Yes, Leon S Kennedy handles like a tank – or, more accurately, a forklift – but those ancient controls turn every encounter into a tense standoff. You plant your feet, aim and fire, aim and fire while hostiles draw ever closer. You 180-turn and run, find a single square foot of tactically advantageous terrain, turn again, methodically aim and fire. Later *Resident Evils* would let you circle-strafe to control crowds and dive to evade incoming attacks, but not in *Resi 4*. Here you plant your feet, take careful aim and stand your ground.

It's a conspicuous videogame mechanic that defied the standards of the day, and it's the first sign that *Resident Evil 4* is forever a slave to gameplay. Reality be damned, the controls make it scarier; besides, you're here to point a shotgun at Jaws, Leatherface, animated suits of armour, The Lord Of The Rings' cave trolls, an army of villagers driven insane by The Thing, and a creature from Predator who fights like The Terminator. You're here to dodge the boulder from Raiders Of The Lost Ark, to ride the minecart from Temple Of Doom, to see a friend die like Bishop in Aliens. You're here to win bottlecap action figures and dress like a 1930s mobster with a laser gun. You're here to *rescue the president's daughter*, for goodness' sake. *Resident Evil 4* is shamelessly, unapologetically a videogame, and it celebrates it by plagiarising a dozen Hollywood movies, using QTEs as an answer for everything and putting a lava lake in the middle of a medieval castle.

Resident Evil 4 is a reminder of the days before the madness of *San Andreas* was replaced by the sobriety of *GTAIV*, when Lara Croft was fighting dinosaurs rather than rapists. It's a game filled with nonsensical flights of fantasy and heavy with indulgences the likes of which only a Shinji Mikami could get away with in a company as large as Capcom. There are cutscenes most players will never see, Easter eggs few will ever discover and entire systems built for fleeting moments then discarded forever – movable bookcases for a siege, a boat for a three-minute boss fight, weaponised lanterns for Ashley's brief interlude, a jet ski for the final escape – and all of them are executed flawlessly.







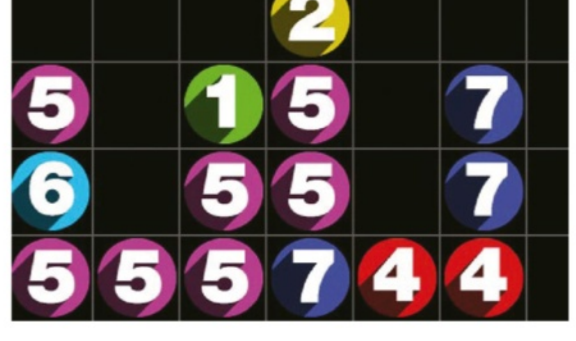
Leon S Kennedy's stilted movement encourages a more considered style of play, setting *Resident Evil 4* apart from mindless strafers

And when it ends, a flickering projector tells the villagers' story in the months before Las Plagas spoiled everything. *Resident Evil 4* swapped vulnerability for empowerment, traded occasional scares for constant dread, and in the end swaps elation for… regret? Pity? Remorse? It's clichéd to call the game a rollercoaster, but here you are – panicked by the sound of a chainsaw, relieved to have made it to shore, thrilled to meet Ashley, frustrated when she's snatched away, awed by the arrival of your backup, triumphant having beaten impossible odds, and saddened to see what became of the villagers and, so much worse, their children.

Resident Evil 4 is best described as the bridge between then and now; PS1 controls with a next-generation camera angle, creative liberties in a time of escalating budgets, Dreamcast QTEs in a world as detailed and original as anything built for 2013 – every inch rusted, burned, abandoned or rotten, all of it somehow touched by death. *Resident Evil 4* created the modern thirdperson shooter, killed the survival-horror genre and became the benchmark by which all videogame campaigns are measured. And all bar a few come up short.

DROP7

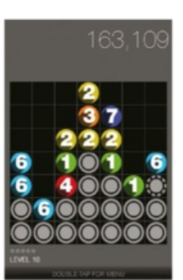
Publisher *Zynga* **Developer** *Area/Code Entertainment* **Format** *Android, iOS* **Release** *2009*



D*rop7* is a marvel of videogame evolution. Clearly descended from *Tetris* – gravity-bound pieces, a growing mound of detritus to clear away before it collides with the top of the screen, the exploitation of our tidying impulse – Area/Code's numerical spin on the formula exhibits such deft speciation that it would be dishonest to wave it away as mere homage. Some days we flirt with the question of whether *Drop7* has surpassed its Russian forebear. At the very least, it's on a shockingly even par.

Good luck finding a more handsome puzzle game. The pleasing symmetry of the 7x7 tile grid. The way the coloured facades of each piece pop from the greyscale background like Dublin's famous painted doors on a dreary afternoon. The subtle pop-art sensibilities of the extruded typeface. The way the point bonuses float off each shattering piece like souls departing the body. And we haven't even broached mechanics yet.

Descending the mineshaft of tactical possibilities, you realise that *Drop7* wants not your reflexes, but your mind. The numbered, circular discs don't rain down unbidden. Each new arrival waits patiently at the top of the screen for you to decide which column it will be deposited into. These oases of chess-like deliberation make *Drop7* the ideal portable companion. If you join a queue at the bank with just one person ahead of you, you'll squeeze in two or three drops, no question. And the move isn't set in motion until you lift your finger off the screen. The game tempts you to second-guess, slide your finger across to a neighbouring column, then reluctantly back again if you decide to trust your first impulse.





Despite appearances, *Drop7* makes very few mathematical demands of the player, instead asking for tactical nous – and a little luck

FOR VETERAN PLAYERS, THE PIECES BECOME DISTINCT CHARACTERS IN AN UNFOLDING DRAMA

As the name suggests, there are seven pieces, each with its own number and associated colour. Each numbered piece shatters when the number of consecutive discs in a column or row matches the number stamped on its face. For veteran players, these pieces become distinct characters in a methodically unfolding drama. We imagine them having personalities. The 1 is a loner. He won't break unless he's in a column or row by himself, pried apart from his neighbours. If the 1 is claustrophobic, the 7 is a boisterous extrovert, revelling in the camaraderie of packed rows and columns.

Sudoku this is not. There's no fatiguing computation required. Nor is it a match-three exercise where you're mindlessly congregating symbols as if brute-forcing cherries on a slot machine display. *Drop7* sits in the sweet middle of this complexity spectrum. Despite its numerical pieces putting on a front of difficulty, the game's arithmetic doesn't require a calculator. Can you count to seven? You're all set. The game's combination-lock dial isn't hard to twist, but you'll spend hours trying to figure out how to decrypt the art of playing it well.

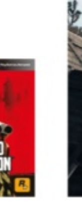
After you've made a set number of moves – which varies depending on the game mode you've selected – a solid row of grey discs pushes up from the bottom of the screen, forcing the existing discs nearer the top. You crack open these ominous roundels by shattering normal ones in adjacent tiles. Then you hold your breath to see what number hatches from behind their dreary shells.

When you're on the ropes, revealing the contents of a grey disc is agony, like watching a blackjack dealer flipping over a card. Sometimes only one specific number will save you. The universe will occasionally bless you with that number, and you rejoice. If you don't get it, you curse, forgetting people within earshot. They couldn't possibly appreciate what you're going through. You hate *Drop7* right now. But you also love it, which is just as well, because the two of you are married for life.

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Publisher *Rockstar Games* ***Developer*** *Rockstar San Diego* ***Format*** *360, PS3* ***Release*** *2010*

G*rand Theft Auto III* may have defined the open-world genre, but it was Rockstar's Western-themed take on the sandbox that demonstrated its full potential to enhance narratives and reinforce our emotional connection to a game, a world and a character. *Red Dead Redemption*'s world was well worth exploring alone, but it worked even better as a playground with others.



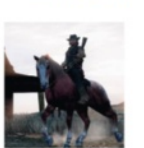
The game featured its take on familiar modes in Shootout and Capture The Bag – both of which began with a Mexican standoff, the survivors of which could rush to advantageous positions before the match began properly – but it was Free Roam that defined *Red Dead*'s online component. Up to 16 players could occupy the full singleplayer map, spanning the fictitious American and Mexican states of New Austin, West Elizabeth and Nuevo Paraíso, wandering the land as a free agent or forming posses of up to eight. Quest-giving NPCs may have been stripped from this wild frontier, but in their place came huge potential for emergent storytelling, authored solely by its players.

With such a rich backdrop on which to roleplay, it was not a developer's imposed goals, but the actions, choices and interactions of players that created meaning – whether strutting through rundown frontier towns, exploring long-abandoned houses or riding across acres of desert. Sometime after finishing the expansive singleplayer game, and savouring the great gaming memories that came with it – the Mexico crossing, the first snowy ride to West Elizabeth and that heartbreaking climactic sucker punch – the realisation dawns on you that the game is only just beginning.



It wasn't heavy-handed about it, but Rockstar still provided plenty of catalysts in its online world. Hunting Grounds saw waves of wild animals bear down on players as their ammo dwindled; Gang Hideouts provided the backdrop to desperate gunfights. Multiplayer challenges mirrored their singleplayer counterparts and took in a broad range of tasks, from collecting eight prickly pears to shooting someone's hat off and then disarming them within three seconds. Crucially, it was the journeys you'd go on in order to complete these, rather than the challenges themselves, that formed the strongest memories.





***Red Dead Redemption*'s longevity is as much down to the ingenuity of its players as the canny release of expansion packs by Rockstar**

The greatest journey of them all would unlock one of gaming's best Achievements – trekking from Blackwater pier in the northeast to Escalera in the southwest between dawn and sundown. It's no trouble at all in the singleplayer game, but in a world filled with other players up to no good? Encountering another posse en route, heading east while you rode west, would spark an impromptu shootout as players scattered for cover, peeking out over rocks and shooting until the sun sank over the horizon.

Rockstar would go on to release a series of game-changing expansion packs with added co-operative missions, competitive modes and multiplayer versions of its parlour games. Most memorable of all was Undead Nightmare, which bravely repurposed *Red Dead*'s world for a new singleplayer adventure in which a reborn John Marston battled zombies to find a cure for his infected wife, and added intense multiplayer wave survival mode Undead Overrun.

Three years after its release, *Red Dead Redemption* still offers plenty of reasons to keep playing, and those who do continue to write their own stories. There remain few better ways to spend an evening's play than seeking adventure with friends under a setting sun, your shadows growing to resemble the tombstones of those you've put in the ground.

What were they? This isn't the first time we've retrospectively awarded maximum scores. In our Retro special in 2002 we gave 10s to two other ageing games.

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV

Publisher *Capcom* **Developer** *Capcom, Dimps* **Format** *360, PC, PS3* **Release** *2010*

Capcom laid down the fighting game lexicon, but the incessant, complex iteration that followed *Street Fighter II*'s success made it almost impenetrable to newcomers. For *Street Fighter IV*, that wouldn't do: a successful return would mean welcoming those whose *Street Fighter* vocabulary was non-existent while retaining the level of mechanical depth that had kept a committed fanbase enraptured through the genre's dark days. Capcom pulled it off, and all it took was two of the most immaculately tuned mechanics the genre has ever seen.

First came the Ultra combo, a move that takes off around half of an opponent's health and whose use is controlled by a meter that fills not as you land hits, but as you take them. It gave beginners a chance to turn the tide of a match right up until their health bar's final pixel; for the skilled it became the most damaging, and flashy, way to end combos.

Then there's the Focus Attack, a single move that proves useful in just about every possible situation. It lets you get away from an opponent, or close the gap. It makes mistakes safe, and extends successful combos. While the swathes of fighting games that have grabbed at *Street Fighter IV*'s coat-tails have all had an Ultra-style comeback mechanic, none of them have managed to recreate the multi-purpose lightning in a bottle of the Focus Attack.





Super Street Fighter IV rewards players who learn from others, with infinite finessing available to those who put in the hours

YOU DON'T NEED TEN-HIT COMBOS, BUT THE BATTLE SYSTEM IS SUCH A DELIGHT THAT YOU'LL WANT THEM

They were... The 1988 action adventure *Exile* ("So far ahead of everything else that it's practically a vision of the future") and 1984's *Elite* ("There's never been a game like it").

Fighting games have long been seen as the sole stomping ground of the impossibly coordinated, those with superhuman reactions and encyclopedic knowledge of frame data. At the highest level that holds true, of course, but in reality *Super Street Fighter IV* is as hard as you make it. You don't need ten-hit combos, but the battle system is such a delight in motion that you'll want them. It's a system capable of producing such grace and beauty that even now, with our bread-and-butter combos long since committed to memory, we daydream about the possibilities of improving them, and ourselves.

The Internet has helped hugely, of course, with forums, YouTube demonstrations and Twitch livestreams helping spread discoveries and finesse strategies. Online, the *Street Fighter II* tactics seen in the game's early days have given way to a high standard of play, a steep learning curve mitigated by a skill-based matchmaking system. There's no better way to learn than to join an eightplayer, winner-stays-on lobby, where losing sends you to the back of the queue. You spend the 15-minute wait watching, learning, preparing for your next crack at that night's lobby tyrant. And when it works – when you break through their defences, land the combo of your dreams and end their reign to a cacophony of headset cheers – well, there's nothing quite like it. Multiplayer is increasingly team-based nowadays, but in this one-on-one battle of wits and skill, the thrill of a win is yours and yours alone.

Lobbies were only introduced in *Super Street Fighter IV*, along with ten characters and some tweaks to the existing cast. The current release, subtitled *Arcade Edition Version 2012* and boasting a roster of 39 characters with a tremendous spread of mechanical and stylistic variety, marries the most wonderfully balanced fighting game of all time to the greatest combo system ever devised. Recent experimentation by Capcom's peers suggests free-to-play is the future of the genre, and as such we may never see *SSFIV*'s kind again, but little matter. Because we'll always have *Super Street Fighter IV*, and we'll be playing it for years to come.

D A R K   S O U L S

Publisher *Namco Bandai* ***Developer*** *FromSoftware* ***Format*** *360, PC, PS3* ***Release*** *2011*

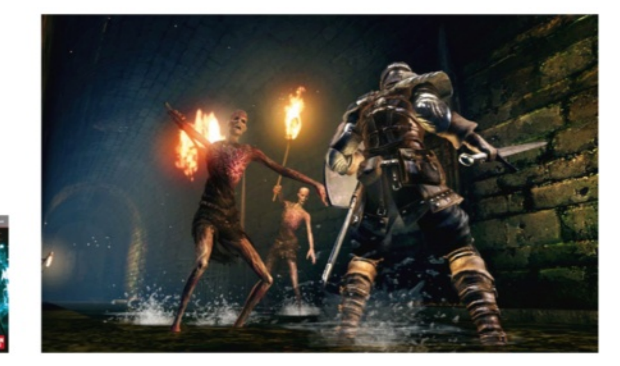
A friend of yours playing *Dark Souls* for the first time is almost guaranteed to stumble across a secret – a concealed elevator shortcut in Sen's Fortress, perhaps – that you somehow missed during all four or five of your playthroughs. You'll swear it was added in a patch. FromSoftware's action-RPG masterpiece continues to shovel rewards into the laps of curious players. We're still debating the lore significance of certain in-game items, still trying to suss out the mechanics of multiplayer covenants. We're still finding hidden pockets of levels that initially seemed walled off. And there is glowing loot waiting in those undiscovered corners.

When you finally unlock The Dark Soul achievement – a Herculean task that involves collecting every rare weapon in the game and spans, at minimum, two-and-a-half playthroughs – it simply means you're permitted to boast of 100% completion in the abstract. You know you haven't seen everything the game has to offer. Not even close. Lordran is so densely packed with things to discover, it's like strolling on a beach where every grain of sand just so happens to be its own Easter egg. In terms of content and design, *Dark Souls* is easily one of the most generous games ever designed.

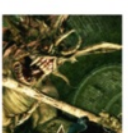


We've visited FromSoftware's Tokyo headquarters where the game was made by a team of just a few dozen. We've seen the boxy grey CRT televisions on which it was tested. It just didn't compute. It still doesn't. How did they do it? It's just another *Dark Souls* secret. We'll never get a satisfying answer.

People fixate on the difficulty because it's the easy talking point, but FromSoftware's masterpiece is arguably less preoccupied with difficulty than your garden-variety firstperson shooter. We've grown accustomed to being asked to choose between words like casual, normal, legendary, survivor, insane, nightmare and the rest before we ever taste a second of gameplay. *Dark Souls* boasts the courage of its design convictions. The world of Lordran has an established temperament and everyone who travels there will face the same travails. The uniformity of experience is part of what makes flinty-eyed *Dark Souls* veterans feel such intense solidarity when they discuss the game. Nobody gets a free pass. Nobody is born with a silver dagger clenched in their teeth.







***Dark Souls*' lack of difficulty levels has created a world in which players are restricted only by their confidence in their own ability**

The game holds you in exceedingly high regard. It believes you are capable of accomplishing remarkable feats, ones that might well seem impossible when first encountered. If you bailed out before completing the game, it was only because you disagreed with its opinion of your capabilities.

Dark Souls' world is such an emotionally resonant space that we constantly find excuses to return. We attempt the OneBro challenge, which involves completing the quest as a level-one character, never accepting the difficulty mitigation of a single upgrade point. We dress up in costumes we've pillaged from enemies and NPCs and then invade other players' worlds in PvP as those characters, roleplaying as the enemy, or for the comedic value of play-acting as Solaire in his underpants. We come back to repeatedly leap off a parapet onto the head of the Taurus Demon, driving our blade into his scalp, just to pay him back for all the heartache he inflicted on us during our first encounter all those hundreds of hours ago.

We come back to *Dark Souls*. And we will keep coming back. Because, once you depart Lordran, all other RPGs – no, all other games – feel hollow. ■

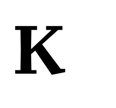


AN AUDIENCE WITH...

KATSUHIRO HARADA

Tekken's custodian talks about making his parents cry, keeping a franchise alive for nearly 20 years, and the role of free-to-play in fighting gaming's future





Katsuhiro Harada, project director at Namco Bandai and the creative face of *Tekken*, is one of Japan's most ebullient, mischievous game creators. A member of the *Tekken* team since its earliest days, Harada isn't afraid to trash-talk his rivals – such as his close friend, *Street Fighter* producer Yoshinori Ono – or make appearances in cosplay as the mascot of his beloved series. But behind the boisterous swagger Harada is, as you might expect, a shrewd designer and marketer. Denied access to videogames when he was growing up, his encounters with the medium were snatched and illicit; darting rendezvous in the local arcades from which, when discovered, he would be hauled by members of the local PTA. Despite spending his career focusing on a single series, his enthusiasm has not diminished. We talk to him about his recent disappearance, disappointing his parents, and the cyclical nature of the fighting game genre.

You were in the news recently for reportedly disappearing for a week. What happened?
It certainly wasn't my intention to disappear. I just needed to take some time out because I've been working so hard. But I learned a valuable lesson through this episode. In today's society, if you turn your cell phone off for any length of time, then people presume that you're missing.

Did you play many videogames when you were growing up?
It's interesting, perhaps that is where this all comes from – my job and my obsessions – because when I was growing up, videogames were viewed with a great deal of suspicion in Japan. If you frequented arcades then the Parent Teacher Association would come looking for you. You'd get in trouble. My parents wouldn't buy me a home console so I had to sneak into arcades. I was discovered and dragged out many times. That cycle continued for a long while. But mostly I stuck to the rules. I worked hard and ended up securing a place at a prestigious university. And, once I'd made it to university, I figured that the adults couldn't really say anything about what I did with my spare time. So I played games constantly and sought out a job where I could do the same. I suppose I was compensating for all those strict rules when I was younger.

When did you know for sure that you wanted to make videogames for a living?
Originally my plan wasn't to make videogames at all. Back when I was in middle school, I copied code out of a magazine and I spent a whole week trying to make a game. But the results were no good. So I figured I'd find a job that allowed me to simply play games for a living instead.

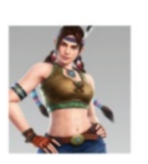
You became a tester, then?
No, not a tester; I joined an arcade to become a promoter. I'd plan events and tournaments for *Street Fighter* and so on. Because of my psychology degree I was fascinated with human behaviour. I'd try moving cabinets to certain spots in the arcade to see if they'd perform better depending on their location. At one point I became obsessed with finding out whether certain types of drink would increase the amount of time that people would play games for, or influence how much they'd spend.

What did your parents think about all of this?
When I first revealed what I was doing, they were devastated. They broke down in tears. But during my first year working in the Namco arcade, I smashed the sales record two months in a row. I received an award of commendation from Namco's president. It was the first time this had happened to an employee in their first year. So while my parents cried when they first heard I'd joined a game company, their feelings shifted somewhat when they heard about those early achievements.



***Tekken* used an innovative control scheme – four buttons, one per limb – that still remains to this day**

How did you transition from working in an arcade to working as a developer?
I spent an entire year chatting to customers, finding out exactly what they liked or disliked about certain titles. I began to think that I could probably make a more successful title than many of the game creators working at that time. I knew what people wanted from their games and the sort of things that put them off playing. Thanks to the award, I now had a platform to approach the management and request that they move me into game development. So towards the end of my first year at Namco, they gave me a position on the first *Tekken*. My job was to balance the game, work on timing and frame data, adjusting that to get the most out of the game. *Tekken* wasn't designed as a fighting game initially. They more wanted to develop a test case for using 3D models. This was a vehicle to try out animation. They really just wanted to prove that they could create a 3D character that would respond to your inputs. It was quite basic in some ways. Now, if you go back and play that early game it's nothing like the game it has evolved into today. It was actually a little bit broken: there were certain moves that couldn't be blocked. In truth, it wasn't very well balanced at all.



***Tekken*'s characters are some of the genre's most recognisable, from Bruce Lee-alike Marshall Law to Julia Chang (above)**

In what ways did you hope to distinguish the game from *Virtua Fighter* as one of the early 3D fighting games?
We weren't really striving to make the game different on a fundamental level to *Virtua Fighter*. Our entire focus was on pushing the technological boundaries. For example, *Ridge Racer* was one of the first times a texture had been added to a polygon model. *Tekken* was an attempt to take that principle and apply it to 3D characters. We were also keen to see if we could create a fighting game that ran at 60fps. *Virtua Fighter* only ran at half

that speed. As you can see, the focus was on technology rather than gameplay design throughout. In fact, the game's director and lead designer, Seiichi Ishii, had previously worked as a motion designer at Sega on *Virtua Fighter*. Ishii was completely focused on the 3D, the models and the framerate. That changed later, but in those early days it was where our focus lay.

How have you managed to stay interested and engaged with *Tekken* for so many years?
The appeal to me is to be found in the thrill of fighting against a human opponent. That interests and motivates me. It began with *Double Dragon* – the scene at the end where you fight against your companion – and then that evolved into *Street Fighter*. The sense of elation that you feel when you win, and the sense of anger you feel when you lose – there aren't many other types of videogame that elicit such strong emotions in such a short space of time as fighting games. It's not like I need to make fighting games per se, but I don't think I could work on any style of game that didn't deal in these heightened emotions. Right now that means working on fighting games, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't be able to work on something different in the future. So if you're making a game you find exciting, it's a shortcut to maintaining interest in developing games for the long haul.

You're one of the few designers to have worked through the rise and fall of fighting games, from the highs of *Tekken 3* and *Street Fighter III* to the lows of the early-to-mid 2000s and back up again with *Street Fighter IV* and *Street Fighter X Tekken*. How will you keep the genre's momentum going?
It really depends. *Tekken* has never been extremely huge and dropped off – it has been fairly constant in terms of sales and player base. Creating a game that appeals to the tournament-going crowd is... well, maybe it's overstating it to say that it's *easy* to take that approach, but you simply need to make something that fills all the requirements of the fighting game community. But to gain a large following you need to appeal to a wide fanbase, and that might not be what tournament players are looking for.

In what ways have you seen that balance change?
We had *Street Fighter II*, which was widely popular. Capcom then updated its series according to what the tournament players wanted, and eventually arrived at *Third Strike*. That game was hugely well received by the tournament-going crowd, but the wider game-buying public wasn't quite so enamoured. So the team returned to what they were doing in the early days of the series with *Street Fighter IV*. It may not be quite as pronounced with *Tekken*, but we still saw the third game draw in a huge number of players, which dropped off with the fourth game. *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* catered to the core crowd, while with the most recent game, *Tekken Revolution*, we're trying to appeal to people who have perhaps never played a fighting game before. It's an almost cyclical setup in fighting games. We see a mainstream title draw in a large number of players, and then subsequent games polish and refine it as their abilities improve.

The most recent *Tekken* for PlayStation 3 adopts a free-to-play model. What do you think makes the genre well suited to this business model, and will we continue to see this approach adopted with fighting games?
It's certainly not been decided internally at Namco Bandai that all of our fighting game titles will be free-to-play in the future. In a sense this is an experiment – try it out and see how consumers respond to this way of working. There are lots of different things we wanted to see as a result of this. Just like in the arcades when I started off, I'm going to be listening to fan feedback and adapting where appropriate. Depending on how well it goes it might influence future decisions, but we're not going to make the next mainline title in the series free-to-play just because this one is.



CV

Harada's route into videogames was an unusual one, but despite his lack of formal training he would establish himself as the creative fulcrum of the series. Like so many of his Japanese peers, nowadays he straddles an awkward line between secretive developer and Twitter community manager, fielding requests and queries from players in (mostly) good spirits. In 2011 he accompanied Yoshinori Ono on the exhausting worldwide promotional tour for crossover *Street Fighter X Tekken* which put the Capcom man in hospital. Harada's current task at Namco Bandai is overseeing development of *Tekken X Street Fighter*, which is still without even a vague release date.

With changing business models and the introduction of new hardware platforms, some of which are digital, it's a turbulent time in the videogame industry. What's the greatest challenge facing the Japanese industry today?
It's a difficult question to answer because there are so, so many challenges facing us. It's not that there's a lack of ideas from Japanese developers, it's just that the system has changed. Japanese games companies are entirely focused on short-term profits. In videogames, it's very hard to take your idea and have it ready in a format that people can see and buy into; that takes money and months of work. It used to be that one company would come up with an idea, create it, take it to market and then, if it was a success, improve it in a sequel based on feedback. Now it's all divided up to spread the risks. One company will have the idea; another company will make the game; still another will sell it and liaise directly with the consumer. I think this lack of a unified creative process has had a profound effect on the industry.

You're now 20 years into a successful career at Namco Bandai, having worked your way up from the arcades to project director. In the beginning, your family wept over your choice of vocation. How do they feel now?
They've come around. It requires considerable effort to rise to the position I have over the past 20 years, and I think they appreciate that now. But I think that the fact I work in videogames is irrelevant, in some ways. To my mind it doesn't matter what you do: you have to produce results otherwise nobody's going to be impressed. I'm still hungry for results. ■





THE NEXT 20

So that's 20 years in the bag. What's in store for the coming two decades?

The year is 1913. You're an avid viewer of moving-picture shows. You're asked to predict what such 'movies' will be like 20 years in the future. What do you say?

The screens will be bigger. The cameras will move. There will be sound! There will be colour!

It's easy to make predictions about technology; you just take what you have already and add what's missing or improve what's already there. Your predictions might not come true within 20 years, but you can be reasonably sure that most of them *will* come true, so long as you keep it simple.

Yet would you, back in 1913, have predicted the evolution of the studio system? Your favourite actors will be contracted to big studios; they'll have little say over what movies they'll appear in. Would you have predicted that a vocabulary of cinematic techniques would develop? Jump cuts, cross-cuts, fades, deep focus, split screens, whip pans – all symbols that viewers interpret as having narrative meaning. Extrapolative predictions are easy to make, but causal ones are much harder.

It is 2013. You're an avid player of videogames. You're asked to predict what such games will be like 20 years in the future. What do you say?

Let's begin with technology. We'll have bigger screens, and smaller screens with higher resolution. This sort of stuff is easy. Except 'screen' isn't the right word; the right word is 'display'. Google Glass can project a display onto your retina. Apple hasn't joined this party yet but you could argue that it deployed the phrase 'Retina display' prematurely. We'll have displays that occupy your full field of vision; in fact, they'll be able to occupy more than that. Turn your head and the display will track what you 'see' to match it, all in seamless 3D. Hardware processing power will need to catch up, however, since expanded field of vision requires significantly more realtime rendering. That kind of deeply immersive environment has to be great for games.

Well, no, it's not necessarily as great as it may seem. How would you interact with such a display? You can't touch it – and if you could, the lactic acid would build up in your muscles as you continually manipulated virtual objects at eye level. You'd develop what early touchscreen researchers called 'gorilla arm'. Tablets avoid this by putting the screen at a book angle, but a virtual world in which looking down equated to looking ahead would actually work against immersion.



VR fashion has matured considerably since the early '90s when we explored the trend in our third issue. With Oculus preparing its popular Rift headset for commercial release, a new VR boom is in the offing

If you wanted to manipulate a full-vision display using your fingers, you'd therefore use a linked tablet as an input device: hands on the tablet, eyes on the big display. A configurable console-style controller would be better for certain kinds of games, but less portable. Neither would be any better at dealing with 3D than today's technology, though. We'll have to hope for a major UI breakthrough of some kind if we want to be able to select semi-occluded objects reliably.

Other input methods will be possible, if not, as with voice, always advisable when you're travelling home on the train. The most interesting today are brainwave readers, which have potential. But to get the kind of fidelity of command demanded by even today's games is probably more than 20 years away. Then again, we'll always be left with the suspicion that anything capable of reading brainwaves might be capable of writing them.

This all assumes that virtual reality is A Good Thing for games in the first place. It might look that way for your favourite genre of games, but 20 years from now people will still be playing *Bejeweled*, and even a holodeck wouldn't make an iota of difference to them. Such players still outnumber you, too. The excitement around Oculus Rift will attract competitors and fuel a VR boom, but it may not deliver precisely what players imagine.

For VR to come into its own, the technology will have to escape the gimmick phase. Stereoscopic 3D movies have been struggling to do this for a while: the early, obvious potential of the method has been explored, but its full implications have not been. Yes, swooping shots of luscious 3D scenery make an impact, but what do they imply beyond 'that looks pretty'? How do you handle concepts such as focus and depth of field? Is there anything to 3D that adds as much to movies as colour and sound did, or is it a solution in search of a problem? At least movie directors have now figured out that in reality most people don't like objects flying out of the screen at them, which represents progress. VR has all these challenges and more heading its way.

Some technologies don't escape the gimmick phase. Consider the Wii Remote: its obvious potential for physicality was explored, but not its potential as a simple pointing device. Four players could interact independently on the same screen at the same time, which suggested many


Google Glass projects images onto your retina, but it's only a small step for display tech

more possibilities than jumping around flailing your arms for 20 minutes, but designers weren't allowed to experiment. The same could happen to VR – its success won't depend on what it does differently, but what it does the same-only-better. Is a VR game just a regular game with a VR interface, or does VR bring something genuinely new? Eventually, yes, it must realise its promise – but in the next 20 years? Coolness only takes a product so far.

Games will be abstracted away from particular platforms – and even particular interfaces. Cloud-based systems will be accessible from multiple devices; you will play using whatever is convenient at the time. Sure, you won't get the same experience with *Halo 11* on your wristwatch as you will on your custom rig, but some things – trading, for example – might actually be easier that way.

What's unlikely to happen is that streaming technologies will allow realtime interaction over the open Internet. When streamed games were first proposed in the late '90s, proponents argued that increases in bandwidth would remove the show-stopping problem of lag. Unfortunately it turned out that content providers across all sorts of media simply made a habit of expanding their offerings to fill available capacity. Unless there's an as-yet-unforeseen multiple-orders-of-magnitude increase in bandwidth in the offing, lag is here to stay and will always pose a problem for live-streamed games.

Cloud-based games enable more subtle possibilities, too. One area that would see enormous interest is customisation through open standards. Many games replicate what other games already have, which is both a duplication of effort and a limiting factor. Cosmetic-only features could easily be made compatible across games. If one game designs a human-male-rub-chin-thoughtfully animation, why can't it be used in another game that uses the same character model? The potential for clothing (categorised, so that you don't get bikinis in ancient Rome) is particularly interesting because of its enormous commercial potential. It's unlikely that an industry standard will arise within the next 20 years, but an in-house style might. If a single developer churns out MMOGs, for example, then it could prove quite lucrative to let people take their outfits from one into another.

Finally, on the tech side, consider voice fonts. Players like to be able to communicate with each other using speech, but it can annoy others in the same room and you don't always sound the way your character ought to sound – gender difference being the most glaring case. If you could type words that would be conveyed to other players as speech, you could participate in conversations among mic-using



If Apple decides to invest in games in a concerted fashion, the next 20 years could see a further power shift

players. You could also speak into a mic and have speech-recognition software convert your words into text that's then read out in a different voice. A game application incorporating voice fonts will likely emerge in the next two decades, although it's difficult to predict precisely when.

Technology aside, the game industry itself will change dramatically in the next 20 years. An easy prediction to make is that there will be many more games available – millions of them – but audience fragmentation will ensure that most cater to narrow but devoted audiences.

It used to be seen as advantageous that the Internet wasn't limited by shelf space. A developer could easily place a game in an online store, but might even have to pay for it to go on sale in a bricks-and-mortar store. Now, however, the severity of the resulting visibility problem is widely understood. When there's a single marketplace that dominates a platform (Apple's App Store, for example, or Steam), unlimited shelf space means unlimited numbers of games. To succeed, a product has to either strike it lucky (as did *Angry Birds*) or have a $500,000 marketing budget and not be terrible. Creating the world's best game is immaterial if no one knows about it.

FOR VR TO COME INTO ITS OWN, THE TECHNOLOGY WILL HAVE TO ESCAPE THE GIMMICK PHASE

This is good news for companies that do have access to a sizeable marketing budget, which is to say most established developers. However, there are other icebergs looming on the horizon, the two main ones being overspecialisation and overshooting.

When consumers play one type of game, after a while they become one with it. They want to keep with the same genre, but go more hardcore. This sort of process has been seen in casual games: to non-expert players, today's hidden-object games bring new and painful meaning to 'hunt the pixel'. When such specialisation goes too far, though, the genre becomes inaccessible and disappears up its backside.

It happened with old-style adventure games: "Oh, I see, I need to put the masking tape on the shed door then pet the cat so it runs into the shed and I can collect some

Angry Birds lured fringe players into games, and they'll be sticking around

Who is it? This writer first appeared in **E88** lamenting poor characterisation in the FPS genre, with Joanna Dark – star of N64 game *Perfect Dark* – at the centre of the piece.

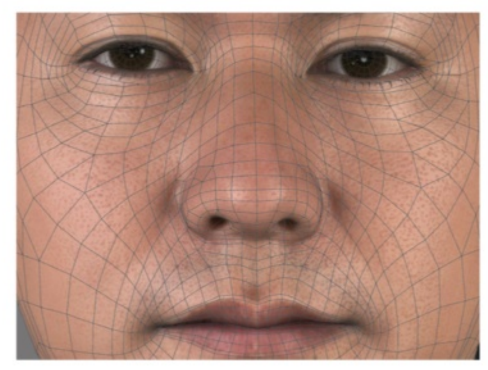
of its fur off the masking tape then combine it with the syrup I found earlier to fashion a false moustache so I can disguise myself to look like the man whose passport I have stolen, but only if I use a marker pen to draw a moustache on his passport photograph because he doesn't actually have a moustache." Yes, that's an actual puzzle from *Gabriel Knight 3*. The formal apology still hasn't arrived.

So which game genres are likely to overspecialise in the next 20 years? Judging by their trajectories in recent years, realtime strategy games and sports sims are prime candidates. They may have millions of fans, but so did adventure games. Unless something happens to shake them up, they'll become ever-more sophisticated as they meet the ever-increasing demands of their ever-more veteran audience, shedding less savvy players and failing to attract new ones as they do so.

Other genres run less of a risk thanks to user-created content. Firstperson shooters, for example, feel reasonably immune. However, some developers and publishers are in danger of pushing too far in the opposite direction. While overspecialisation reduces the userbase to a rump of dedicated players supported by small-scale developers (some modern adventure games are actually pretty good, but that doesn't mean you're likely to try one), overshooting expands it to a mass of dilettantes.

Consider the analogy of the sports car. It used to be that sports cars were small, nimble vehicles boasting high performance. After the demand for them flattened, manufacturers started to add features that would appeal to a wider market. They softened the experience, adding better safety features, more space, less-spirited throttle response and higher driver comfort. It worked for a time: more sports cars were sold. However, the designs drifted away from what a sports car *was*. In attempting to sell more sports cars, manufacturers lost their core audience and wound up competing with regular cars for sales. When the Mazda MX-5 launched, its back-to-basics approach was exactly what the forgotten core sports car enthusiast had been waiting for. As a result, it rapidly became the world's best-selling sports car.

Overshooting – incrementally diluting the essence of a product in order to attract more users – is growing in the game industry, and the genre currently most vulnerable right now is the MMOG. Developers have dumbed down their offerings so much in an attempt to draw in casual players that they're now in competition not so much with each other as with the likes of *FarmVille 2*. Some time in the coming few years, the genre is almost certain to undergo a reboot, as a Mazda-MX-5-style MMOG



With Konami's groundbreaking Fox Engine producing visuals this realistic, the line between virtual and real will continue to erode

launches that appeals to those millions of former MMOG players currently treading water in singleplayer games or MOBAs such as *Dota 2* and *League Of Legends*.

This ebb and flow of overspecialising and overshooting will continue in the next two decades, but should eventually result in a clearer partition between games for particular audiences. You don't need a million players to make money from an MMOG: you can get by with 20,000 if you design for it. So long as the niches aren't sealed off from the rest of the gaming world (either by interface, subject matter or by impenetrable gameplay), a stable market should develop in which anyone who wants to find a game that works for them will be able to do so.

WE'LL SEE INDUSTRY FIGURES WITH KNIGHTHOODS. WE COULD EVEN SEE ONE IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Clearly we cannot look at gaming's future without considering revenue models. Today, free-to-play rules for online games. Given that the trend is for virtually all games of any substance to have an online component, we can expect to see its dominance continue. Will it still be the main way to pay for games 20 years from now, though?

Free-to-play works for games with large userbases, but it doesn't scale down well for games that don't have them – especially if those games are not social in nature. Free-to-play will still be big, but there will be stronger dividing lines between what is and isn't acceptable to sell to those people who don't want to play for free.

Whales will have learned that virtual goods are ephemeral and that virtual friendships come and go; they'll therefore be more discerning in deciding where to spend their money. There will always be a market for games that eschew free-to-play, because of the negative impact the concept has on fairness, even though fairness is a relative concept – one person's pay-to-cheat is another person's pay-to-explore.

Experimentation with other revenue models will continue over the next two decades. Economic conditions could mean older ideas such as per-hour charging will be given a second chance (and fail). Will the classic pay-to-own



With eSports on the rise, games like *Dota 2* stand to be the football of tomorrow

It is... Steven Poole, **Edge**'s longest-serving columnist. Dark, he said, would fail in stealth-based situations because "the metallic clanking of her outfit would give her away immediately."





The heightened clout wielded by auteur designers such as Ken Levine, Hideo Kojima and Tim Schafer bodes well for the growth of new genres and viability of bold, untested ideas

paradigm be superseded altogether? It's unlikely. Development costs for high-end games may come down, but they won't be reduced so much that recouping them through the one-off selling of *something* – even if it's only access to a server – is no longer necessary.

What will the games themselves be like 20 years from now? In simple terms, they will be better. Better in what way? Well, we can safely say that the play experience for any individual player is, on the whole, likely to be an improvement on his or her current experience – at least from the point of view of that specific player. We can say this because, although games have been played since before there were people – animals play games, after all – only now, with videogames, are they being played by adults in large numbers. Most UK and US residents in their 30s either grew up playing games or grew up among others who played them. We've been schooled in playing games. In playing them, we've learned more *about* playing them, and our understanding of them as a player has matured. You may have enjoyed The Very Hungry Caterpillar when you were learning to read, but your preferred reading material today isn't The Very Hungry Caterpillar Of The Rings. You've moved on. So it will be with games: consumers' tastes will refine, and they will look for games with more depth and meaning.

As a consequence, game designers will become better known. You won't have to visit MobyGames to find out the names of the lead designers of the first *Medal Of Honor* (Christopher Cross and Lynn Henson) any more than you'd need to go to a specialist site to find out who wrote Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone. Today, there are relatively few celebrity game designers, mainly because the studios like it that way: as in the early days of film, they'd prefer consumers to think of what they play in terms of being a BioWare game or a PopCap game. The situation will change when studios realise that some people really are better at designing games than others, and step up their approaches to poaching talent. The escalation of the game designer's own brand has already happened to a degree, although not always with success (*Richard Garriott's Tabula Rasa* is no longer with us). It will occur with increasing frequency, though, and with more reliable results.

When designers, not the holders of purse strings, are put in a position where they can call the shots, they will begin to do so. They will be given more freedom to explore side projects allowing them to indulge their playfulness and self-expression. Some of those side projects will become monster hits. No one will be able to predict which, least of all the designers themselves, but it will happen. The removal of traditional creative shackles could see whole new genres appear by 2033.

The increasing celebrity of designers will occur in tandem with the increasing acceptance of games as an integral spoke of popular culture. Those who today worry about games turning people into child molesters addicted to murder will be well into their twilight years by then, if not dead. They won't be of any more concern than those today, who 20 years ago were wailing about 'video nasties'. We will see leading figures from the videogame industry with knighthoods. We could conceivably see one or two in the House Of Lords. The President of the United States will have grown up getting into fights with his or her siblings over whose turn it was on *Super Mario Bros*.



With people raised on *Super Mario World* reaching middle age in the coming years, stigmas will disappear

And there's another reason that we'll have better games. With the base-level acceptance of the form as something other than low culture, academics will finally be free to study games for their own sake, rather than having to dress up their research as 'serious games', which is akin to having to pass off an interest in creative writing as journalism. Scientifically valid metrics for 'better' will be developed, allowing new methods of improving game designs to open up in turn.

In two decades' time, games will be ubiquitous, accessible everywhere, so there will always be games that you want to play. They will be culturally embedded to the extent that the babies being born this month will grow up scarcely able to conceive of what the world would be like without them, in much the same way as today it is difficult for most people to conceive of a world without television.

Alternatively, in 20 years some new form of media may have come along to supersede games, just as games superseded videos superseded television superseded radio superseded movies superseded music hall superseded theatre. Things change. Games are at the vanguard of entertainment and technological innovation right now, but can they retain that position?

It's 2013. You're an avid player of videogames. You're asked to predict what such games will be like 20 years in the future. What would you say? ■





AN AUDIENCE WITH... DAVID BRABEN

Elite's co-creator talks about the danger of isolating players with peripherals, the fate of motion control, and the beauty of open worlds



With *Elite*, **David Braben** co-created one of the most influential games of all time. A game that not only defined the template for 3D space simulations, but one that set out nonlinear gameplay precepts that designers still look to today. Twenty years on, the series remains at the cutting edge of videogame development as Braben crowdfunds a complex living universe populated by other players for the fourth game, *Elite: Dangerous*. Braben has found other avenues to explore, too, testing the current limits of motion control in games like *LostWinds* and *Kinectimals*, and, through his position as Raspberry Pi Foundation trustee, helping to promote the teaching of computer science in school through Eben Upton's pocket-sized computer. Braben is enthusiastic during interviews, but thoughtful, too, his speech measured and rhythmic as he pauses to consider each passionately delivered point. Twenty years ago, issue one of **Edge** and *Frontier: Elite II* launched within a month of each other, which seems like a good place to start.

Do you miss anything from 1993's development landscape?
I miss the feeling that you could, as a single person or small team, make a huge amount of progress. That time was pretty much the forefront of the rise of the larger team. In the early '90s, most games were made by 'teams' with a single-digit number of people. I'm not saying we'd do everything, but as we were making the game we'd say, "Oh, we need someone to do music," so we'd phone up the people we knew could do that.

Things were simpler then, but we were in such a state of transition that ever since, this industry has just continually been changing. That time was actually particularly painful because we were moving from what you might call the back-bedroom-crew developer to the professional one, and you ended up with a lot of things in between which to me certainly weren't professional. There was a lot of shadiness in that business, if you know what I mean; a lot of people trying to make a fast buck. We saw quite a number of new publishers coming in that soured things a little bit. So I'd say things are way better now than they were then.

Back then, there was ACE magazine, and in some ways **Edge** was its spiritual successor. They both had the really high production values and they both very much covered – probably more so **Edge** – games as art. And I think that appealed quite a lot to game designers' vanity, like mine [laughs]. They put games on a pedestal, and it was the sort of coverage that has stood the test of time more than some of the other publications.

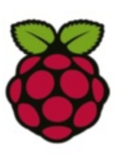
You were interviewed by one of our readers in Edge issue five, and you described virtual reality as a distraction – has Oculus Rift finally convinced you?
Oculus Rift is great. And I applaud all the experimentation in virtual reality. But with all the virtual reality technologies over time, there are so many things that you have to get absolutely right, and humans are very good at identifying when something is wrong. 3D technology is a case in point, and something that I've always been pretty sceptical of mainly because it's actually quite hard on the eyes. It gives people headaches and it's not pleasant to do for an extended period of time. But more than that, I'm slightly weary that as an industry if we cut people off from the world it has implications for the way games are viewed generally. Don't get me wrong, I think it's a great experience, but if we make headsets for gamers that cut them off visually and aurally from the world, we will take an awful lot of criticism.

So, in your eyes, devices like Oculus Rift could, to some extent, set the industry's reputation back to the way it was before social gaming and motion control?
If you exclude the entire world, it's a much harder ask for the technology in terms of what it allows you to do. Can you answer your phone, for example? Probably not. There are challenges to that. But the one that concerns me more is that I really don't want the games industry to go back to a niche. I think we can make games that are like that, but if it becomes the default, if people were watching television on a headset that excluded them from their family, would we think that's a good thing? Now we might think the experience of watching television like that is better. But it might be like the 3D glasses thing; it works OK in the cinema because it's an activity where you're all going to do it, but when you're in a social environment where the interaction with other people in the room is as important as watching the TV, then having something that excludes you. I mean, I love the idea of social games where you're involving other people and of course that *can* work through a headset.



Elite used hidden line removal to make its wireframe models appear as if they were solid 3D

I think [technology like this is] very interesting and I think sometime soon the technology will get a lot better. I'm not talking about any one technology, but it can't make people feel sick, make their eyes hurt, or any of the things people have said. And it also mustn't exclude people from the rest of the world.



Raspberry Pi's simple architecture and low cost offers today's aspiring devs an equivalent of the BBC Micro, *Elite*'s first home

Do you imagine that that concern could hamper the evolution of this kind of technology, and restrict it to a niche?
Well, I think potentially, yes. There are parallel needs, really, and I think as our industry gets bigger it can support more and more niches without damaging itself. Look at the Omni. It's that sort of technology that I think, 'Actually, that's quite interesting'. The Wii Balance Board worked because it was inclusive. It was quite a social thing because you were commenting and guffawing on the failures of one of your number, but you didn't want to criticise too much because it's probably you up next. And that, admittedly in a party game where each person's just having a go for a minute or two, is very additive. With Omni, you can imagine that technology will eventually get to where it's like you're running around a bumpy field or

battlefield. The immersive stuff is interesting – it's just trying to make sure that it doesn't isolate an individual.

I think isolation can be appropriate, too: people can go head-down and play games, but it's when that obsession factor causes damage towards our industry. Twenty years ago our image was very different; it was kids in their bedrooms, never coming downstairs, being obsessed with things their parents had no understanding of. The great thing now is, to an extent, that's moved into the living room. But the obsession thing hasn't completely gone away and that's because a lot of games are very compelling. But having kids obsessed with *Minecraft* is so much better than being obsessed with something like *Call Of Duty*.

Setting aside funding methods, what does it mean to be developing a new *Elite* in today's industry?
It feels great because we can try out and discuss so many rich details, and the scope that's open to us is much broader. I think that's fantastic. Also, the tools today are much better. The power of the machines is astounding. It's amazing to me what we can do on-the-fly now that in the past we couldn't even contemplate doing. There's the technology enabler, but also the sheer size of the team, the manpower you can deploy on a game these days.

The manpower you're deploying is relatively modest, though, isn't it?
It is, but that's partly brought about by the fact that we have a procedurally generated game. It's still around 60 people, so it's a lot of people if you think about each person working on a different set of tasks. Compared to one, that's a hell of a ratio.

At E3 this year, open worlds were prevalent, from puzzle adventures to racing games. As one of the accepted originators of open-world games, how does it make you feel to see it becoming an accepted baseline standard?
It's fantastic, and I'm honoured. I've always loved not necessarily following the railway line path. I love running around to see how things are. When *San Andreas* was released, I recognised some of the scenes, little vignettes taken from various areas in Los Angeles, and the contrast there. It's where the openness of a game almost makes it as much of an activity as the game. You're playing it for interest as well as the challenge of progressing. For example, I love astronomy but was never really interested in star-spotting in the night sky. But what Frontier did for me was make me go, "Oh, wow". I learned about it because it matched up [with reality]. When you have the openness of the world and you can look beyond a 'set', you've got to make it so much more complete, and I love games that do that.

***Elite* casts a long shadow over your career. Is that always a positive experience for you?**
[Laughs] It's *mostly* positive. I was always very proud of *Elite* and it was a great time when we were making it as well. To apply any negativity to it would be stupid. But sometimes... let's just say everyone has a different impression of the game, and we've seen this a lot through the Kickstarter, people saying it's a very solitary singleplayer game when actually one of the things I've always wanted to bring to it is the social aspect, getting into battle together.

***Kinectimals* was the most charming use of Microsoft's peripheral – what's your take on Xbox One's *Kinect*?**
It's a lot better, and it works in a different way. But I think the most important thing, in a bizarre way, is the fact that it's bundled with the machine; it means it can just be used where it's additive. One of the things I said at the start with the initial Kinect is that I wanted games to be augmented by, rather than necessarily defined by, Kinect. So you could still be playing *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* on a controller and just lean your head left and right. I've always thought just a few extra buttons would be great for that sort of game. Because [those kinds of actions are usually] on different buttons that don't necessarily fit in well with the control scheme – lean left being on the D-pad, for example. Not everyone needs to have it but that sort of thing would be great. I always thought the way voice was used in *Skyrim* was good. You could just say [a spell name] while fighting off some annoyingly powerful monster, and I thought that addition was lovely. And because it's with the machine this time, you can assume it's there. And I think we're going to see some nice game design approaches coming out of that.





CV

Braben studied computer science at Cambridge, where he met Ian Bell, with whom he wrote *Elite*. The game, released in 1984, found its way to nearly 20 formats, pioneered new technologies and spawned the first Internet user group. Next Braben made *Zarch*, one of the first games to use solid 3D graphics, before writing the sequel to *Elite*, *Frontier*. In 1994 Braben founded Frontier Developments, which created *Dog's Life*, *Kinectimals* and *LostWinds*. Braben is a trustee for the Raspberry Pi Foundation, which promotes the teaching of computer science at school. He's currently working on *Elite: Dangerous* and unannounced Xbox One projects.

But from the other side, would you agree motion control has failed to live up to its potential? Has the learning curve been too slow there?
That's one to answer on so many levels, and it depends what you consider to be motion control. When we first came into this, five or six years ago, the talk about motion control was about new interfaces. Touchscreen was considered alongside camera-based technologies like Kinect. And both have very much changed the way people look at games. I think some of the swipe systems, certainly the fantasy of it, in Kinect, work very well. Often the only problem is the interface isn't pervasive. And, to reiterate, I think [the use of] speech with these technologies is very much overlooked, but can be pretty good. I think what's happened now is touchscreens have been sort of subsumed into the canon of user interfaces; they're now just accepted. One of the challenges with Kinect was it lacked ubiquity, but I think you're right that it hasn't evolved into a default interface, and I think that speaks quite a few volumes. ■



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Far Cry 3 360
It may still thrill as we sneak through jungles with an explosive arrow primed like a latter-day John Rambo, but *Far Cry 3*'s got problems. Some are mechanical – we'd like a strong word with whoever mapped looting a corpse and picking up his weapon to the same button – but many are thematic. Pink handcuffs are kept in open lockboxes deep in ancient temples, and the cover star is on the screen for all of half an hour.

Rogue Legacy PC
Hitting a wall with only two of four bosses conquered, we find ourselves repeatedly clearing out *Rogue Legacy*'s easier areas to build up the stats of our descendants. Passing funds, gear and skills down the generations is a fine way to sweeten the roguelike's bitter pill, but it also strikes an emotional chord. Making your children healthier, stronger and richer is a smart bit of game design and a fine attitude to life.

Half-Life 2 PC
While the wait continues for *Half-Life 3*, the modding community continues to do remarkable things with its predecessor. An irresistible discount in the Steam sale was followed by the discovery of FakeFactory's stunning Cinematic Mod. HD textures appear all round, and every character model in the game has been overhauled. There's even a new orchestral score. One sour note: Alyx's barely recognisable, scantily clad new character model.

Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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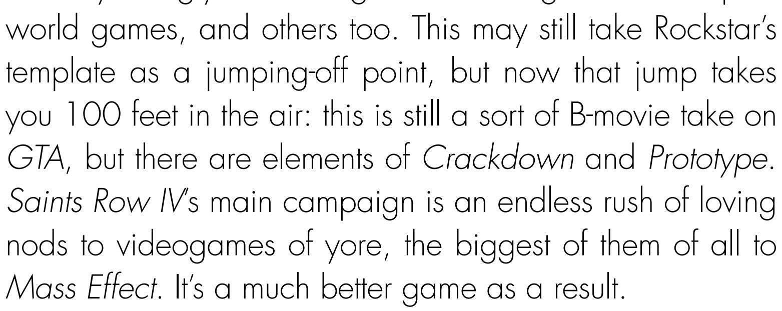
Wearing your influences with pride

Musicians and film directors speak openly about the artists who shaped their work. Yet game makers, by and large, prefer not to admit taking inspiration from fellow creators. Other people's games are spoken of with respect, sure, but rarely with reverence. It seems that videogames are the last medium in which influences are to be downplayed instead of celebrated.

Until recently, anyway. In issue 257, *Watch Dogs'* developers praised *Demon's Souls*, while the creators of *Destiny* enthused about *Borderlands*. And this month's new releases further suggest that the tide is turning. Take *Rayman Legends* (p110), a game in a series with a rich legacy of its own but which gleefully riffs on countless others. Some are obvious, but we'd never have expected to see *BioShock* referenced in a cartoonish side-scroller.

And *Saints Row IV* (p100) finally sees Volition escape *Grand Theft Auto*'s shadow, though it does so by lovingly referencing a host of this generation's open-world games, and others too. This may still take Rockstar's template as a jumping-off point, but now that jump takes you 100 feet in the air: this is still a sort of B-movie take on *GTA*, but there are elements of *Crackdown* and *Prototype*. *Saints Row IV*'s main campaign is an endless rush of loving nods to videogames of yore, the biggest of them of all to *Mass Effect*. It's a much better game as a result.





You can take things too far, of course. In *Divekick* (p117), the fighting game references come thick and fast, though most will be lost on all but the hardened fan. If you know the genre, the scene and its vocabulary, however, it's a triumph.

Perhaps games are simply growing up? More likely it's all about the end of a generation being a time of reflection. Regardless, it's heartening to see games, and their makers, wearing their influences on their sleeves.

Saints Row IV

Publisher Deep Silver
Developer Volition
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Thirty minutes into *Saints Row IV* and we've shot our way through a military base before disarming a nuclear bomb in flight, winning the hearts of the nation and the presidency of the USA. We've signed off on a cure for cancer, and fended off aliens from a turret gun on the White House lawn. It's immediately clear that *Saints Row* has finally abandoned any of the pretence at gritty underworld realism that was so at odds with the slapstick of previous games in the series. This is the game that finally provides an appropriate thematic context for *Saints Row*'s mechanics, one that sees the Steelport Saints emerge from *Grand Theft Auto*'s shadow once and for all.

In doing so it steps firmly into the arms of many others, admittedly, but this no rip-off, no homage. It's a love letter to an entire medium. In throwaway NPC quips, side-missions and key central mechanics it's made clear that Volition has been playing the same games you have. It's cherry-picked from the ones it's loved the most, thrown them all together and made one of the most coherent open-world games in a generation that's been full of the things.

It's Hollywood that sets the whole thing up, though: this started life as an expansion to *Saints Row: The Third* called *Enter The Dominatrix*. The Zin, the alien race behind the invasion, keeps Earth's surviving inhabitants alive in pods of goo and drops them into computer simulations based on their nightmares. After we lay waste to '50s small-town America with an RPG, Zinyak, the Zin's leader and the principal antagonist, drops us into an even worse simulation: *Saints Row: The Third*'s host city of Steelport, shrouded in perpetual darkness, its rival gangs replaced with an almighty alien force.

Thanks to Kinzie – *The Third*'s computer geek who shepherds us between virtual and actual reality – we soon break free of the simulation, fighting our way out of a Zin space station and onto a ship of our own. From here we can move freely in and out of Zin simulations, rescuing our fellow Saints one by one, building a team to take on the alien aggressors. It's *Mass Effect*, of course, right down to the loyalty missions and potential for romance. But this is still *Saints Row*, so you're only a button press away from the latter, while the former turn your crew into superheroes.

Your new-found powers mean you're unlikely to even notice, much less appreciate, a subtly overhauled vehicle handling model. Following the GPS around Steelport's freeway network seems rather pointless when your super-sprint comfortably outpaces even the speediest cars and you can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Over time, you'll learn to run faster and up walls. You'll add a higher jump, an air dash and a glide to your repertoire. All are unlocked by collecting shimmering blue blocks of code, here called Clusters but which might as well have just been called

This is no rip-off. It's a love letter to an entire medium. Volition has been playing the same games you have



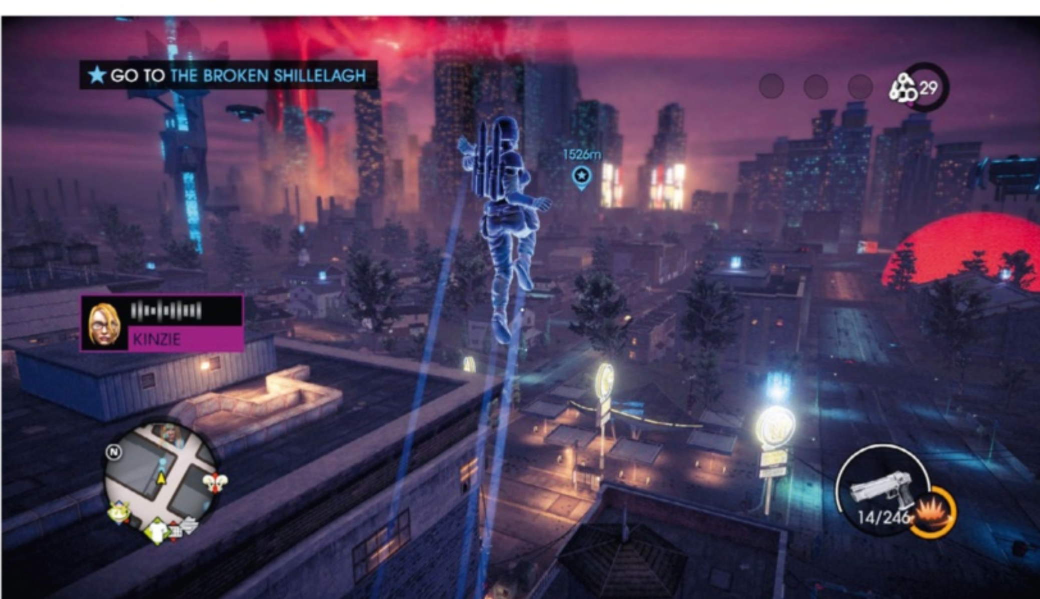
Crackdown's Agility Orbs. There's a key difference: Clusters are currency, and you choose which abilities you upgrade and when, a smart design choice in a game series with a history of player customisation.

Your abilities extend beyond mere traversal, with four combat powers, each with switchable elemental effects, mapped to the D-pad. Blast lets you set fire to enemies or freeze them in place; Buff adds the same properties to your bullets. Stomp brings you down to earth at speed, flinging groups of foes into the sky, while Telekinesis lets you pick up and sling people and objects at the horizon. These, too, can be upgraded with Clusters, increasing damage, range and duration while reducing cooldown times. They greatly change the flow of *Saints Row*'s previously attritional combat; when enemy vehicles arrive en masse you're only ever an icy Blast and well-placed shot away from a colossal explosion. And if any innocents are caught in the crossfire, well, it's only a computer simulation.

Of all the changes it's the arsenal that perhaps best reflects *Saints Row IV*'s welcome shift in tone. *The Third*'s headline weapon was the Penetrator, a gigantic purple dildo bat that, together with pornstar-fronted marketing campaigns, perfectly reflected the series' puerility and attitude to women. *The Third* was, after all, a game in which you rescued migrant sex workers from a shipping container and had to choose between either selling them back to the person you'd saved them from or putting them to work yourself. Now the comic relief comes from the Dubstep Gun, whose sonic blast kills those caught in its path but makes everyone else bust out angular dance moves until the wubs run out.

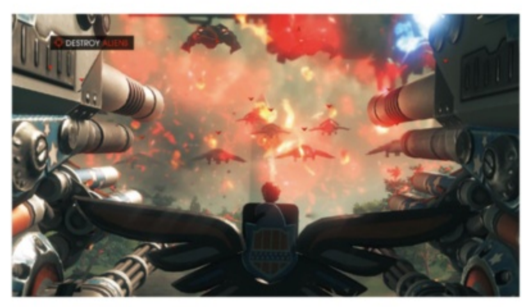
The alien arsenal is a toyset, really, from the Singularity Gun (black holes), to the Disintegrator (instant vaporisation) via the Dominator (the stopping power of a shotgun with the range of an assault rifle). As before, weapons can be improved at Friendly Fire gun stores, but the best upgrades are no longer tucked away at the top of the tree; you can give your pistol explosive rounds before addressing base damage or reload speed, so long as you've got the funds.

Your new traversal and combat options make simply moving around the city and getting into scrapes a pleasure. You'll take off toward your destination, swooping down to pick up a Cluster before scampering up the side of a skyscraper and taking to the skies again. Ad-hoc combat has historically been something to be avoided given the inevitable subsequent struggle to escape the police or a rival gang, but here you're only a sprint and a jump from safety. And while other superhero games have scaled the enemy threat to match the protagonist's powers – *Prototype*'s infinite helicopters, for instance – here you are, by some distance, the most powerful thing in the game, able to

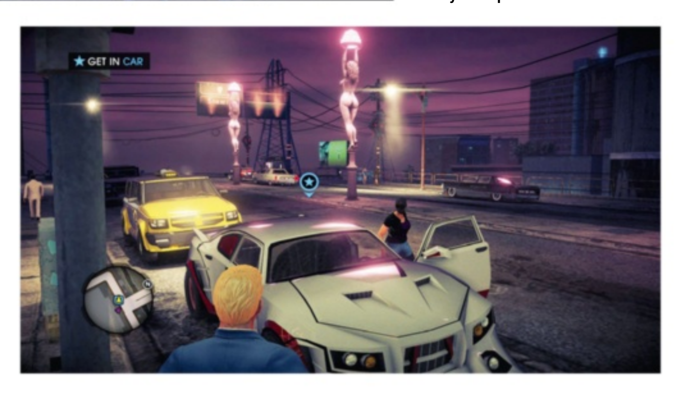


ABOVE While you'll spend most of your time high in the sky, it's worth coming back down to virtual Earth every so often. Your super sprint isn't just faster, but also stronger than the game's cars: any that get in the way will bounce off you.
LEFT Character customisation is as rich as ever, and we were pleased to see our *Saints Row: The Third* avatar carried over automatically. Costumes range from the absurd to the highly recognisable, such as this Boba Fett get-up

BELOW The game may insist on you getting in a car when you're ferrying fellow Saints somewhere. Handling is friendlier than *GTAIV*'s ilk, but brake too aggressively and you'll spot the difference



ABOVE Steelport Saints' White House has an anti-aircraft gun emplacement beneath its lawn. There's also a stripper's pole and a live tiger in these corridors of power, while the Oval Office doubles up as an armoury



take down a UFO with a single Fire Blast. Combine all that with our hero's ability to escape the simulation entirely, and Volition can break free of the travel-kill-escape template so common in open-world games.

It does so with gusto, dropping you into a hulking mechanised suit in an alien base, a tank in a vector-drawn limbo, a crudely illustrated text adventure, and a side-scrolling beat 'em up, to name but a few. Volition seems to be having fun throughout, especially in the missions that involve your fellow crew: each must first be rescued from their own private simulation then accompanied on a loyalty mission in which you help them overcome some long-standing rival or regret. You'll revisit Stillwater, *Saints Row 2*'s host city. You'll go on a stealth mission that lovingly pokes fun at *Metal Gear Solid*. You'll help act out a fanfic episode of Nyte Blayde, *Saints Row*'s vampire hunter TV show. Each serves to deepen your connection to what has historically been a throwaway, archetypal supporting cast, and while most are played for laughs, there are exceptions: Shaundi's struggle to come to peace with her hippie stoner past is particularly sweetly handled. There are tangible rewards to doing right by your fellow Saints, with completed quests serving up not only the standard dollop of funds and XP, but new powers, weapons and costumes, too.

Given how successfully Volition throws off the shackles of previous games in the series, it's disappointing that after that blistering opening half-hour the studio settles into its old rhythm; the first few hours see you bombarded with quests that serve only to introduce each of the game's activities. While it seems churlish to complain about being forced to play a round of Fraud – in which you throw yourself in front of a car then use some ridiculous ragdoll physics to bounce off successive bonnets and bumpers to build up a vast insurance payout – it's one of a very few signs of Volition leaning on its established template. Not all the changes work, either: having the music keep playing after you exit a vehicle is a fine idea that makes sense in a computer simulation, but with only seven radio stations, most of which are acquired tastes, you'll be reaching for the mute button long before the credits roll.



GAT AND MOUSE

Co-op has long been a focus for Volition, and two of *Saints Row IV*'s activities are only available to those indulging in jolly cooperation. Cat And Mouse puts *Saints Row*'s many vehicles to good use – a VTOL chasing a roadster, say, or a monster truck hunting down a quad bike. Death Tag, meanwhile, is a standard deathmatch, albeit one with superpowers and constant interference from police and Zin. Yet the best thrills come from joining together in the game's myriad activities: the harder goals are that much easier to achieve when you've got two guns, tanks or mechanised suits on screen. Assuming you actually get round to starting a mission, that is – it's all too easy to spend hours running around Volition's playground throwing cars at each other.

ABOVE Professor Genki, the pink cartoon cat with a gigantic head, returns, as does his ultraviolent game show. Elements such as these remind you that what you're playing began life as an expansion pack

Yet these are merely scratches on the paintwork of a game that finally delivers on the vision laid out in the flawed *Saints Rows* of yore. This may be a scrapbook collage of mechanics magpied from other games with better reputations, but it's packaged together with wit, charm and, crucially, heart. *Saints Row IV* is in love with videogames not for their worlds or their systems but for the simple pleasure of play, and the anodyne city of Steelport has been transformed into a playground – a sandbox in the realest sense.

With this game Volition has at last cast off the dumb puerility and blithe misogyny that have long blighted this series, and as we let loose a fully charged super-jump from Steelport's highest point, gliding to an objective that's almost three kilometres away, the whistling wind jostling with Montell Jordan's This Is How We Do It for prominence in our ears, we can't help but feel this is the game Volition has always wanted to make. One thing's for sure: it's the one we've been waiting to play.

8

Post Script

Interview: Steve Jaros, creative director

Saints Row IV has had a troubled gestation. A planned expansion, *Enter The Dominatrix*, was cancelled and folded into the next major game in the series. Publisher THQ went bust. We talk to **Steve Jaros**, creative director at Volition, about the game's convoluted development, the return of a much-missed member of the series' supporting cast, and how throwing off the shackles of realism made for the most coherent *Saints Row* game to date.



Did the superpowers come from *Enter The Dominatrix*, or were they always intended to be in *Saints Row IV*?
We originally planned on *Enter The Dominatrix* being this bridge into *Saints Row IV*, but then we realised we didn't need it. We always had in mind what we wanted the future of the open-world genre to be. Superpowers were the next logical step.

What was it like in the final days of THQ and the transition to your new publisher?
Scary. I remember we got the notice that we were gonna go to auction on New Year's Day. We had no idea what was going on when the auction was happening. We were just refreshing a Reddit page. It was a very tender time.

Deep Silver have really trusted us to just go and do our job. They haven't meddled with things creatively, they've just said, "How can we support what you're doing? We believe in the brand and we believe in you as a studio." It's been really refreshing. For most people the only thing that's changed is the name on the paycheque.

There's no Penetrator, no pornstar marketing. Are you moving away from that sort of thing now?
The funny thing about the dildo bat is that it showed up at like one point in the game. People used it as this marketing tool, put it front and centre, but I would never say it was front and centre in the game itself. I think what we've done on *Saints Row IV* is really embrace more of what the game is about.

Every time we've made a new *Saints Row* game we've got better at crystallising that experience: what are we doing that's been misconstrued? What are we doing that resonates? [With] *Saints Row* we were trying to do something over-the-top and silly, but because we were trying to play with hip-hop culture, we were too close to the subject matter. People didn't know if we were trying to be funny or if it was out of touch. We started trying to push it in *Saints Row 2* but it still didn't quite get through. We went over the top on *Saints Row 3*, and people got that. *Saints Row IV* is about honing that, refining it: what does it mean to really embrace whimsy, fun and insanity? What do you get when you do that?

> "It's weird: of all the Saints Row games it's the one with aliens and the player as the President that makes the most sense"



Superpowers improve traversal and combat; the ship affords greater freedom in mission design. What else did they give you that you couldn't have done in a traditional *Saints Row* game?
The moment we started talking about aliens and virtual reality it allowed us to go create these scenarios that we didn't need to justify. We wanted to do away with artifice. It's so weird: of all the *Saints Row* games that we've done it's the one with aliens and the player as the President that actually makes the most amount of sense, because we've justified a reason for everything being there. There's actual context for our stupidity! And it makes it more charming, this thin veneer of a wink and a smile that keeps it from being jarring.

You killed off a major character, Johnny Gat, early in *Saints Row: The Third*. Why did you do that, and why bring him back now?
In the very first draft, Johnny didn't die at all. Then we wanted to do something to make people really hate the bad guys, so he went out like a hero, got killed in this very brutal fight. But people looked at that and said, "Man, that's really sad. Best friend dead? That's kind of a bummer. *Saints Row* should be fun." So we pulled away a lot of those elements. What was left behind never had the pathos it was originally intended to.

We were going to tease the return of Johnny Gat at the end of *Saints Row 3*, but for budgetary reasons we never got to put it in. We knew we wanted him to be a part of *Saints Row IV*; we just had to figure out the best way to do it. When all the fan reaction came out, we knew it'd be a disservice not to bring him back.

You've actively marketed his return; were you not tempted to keep it back as a surprise?
Oh, absolutely. Marketing in games is really tricky: you want surprises, but you want to make people excited. You might have this perfect moment in a game, but you have to sit through 16 hours to get to it. Where do you draw the line? It's great if they can go in blind but I also know people got really excited when they found out Johnny Gat was coming back, and that's really cool too.

Earth's been destroyed; the Boss has superpowers. Where does *Saints Row* go from here?
It's something we're actively talking about. The stuff we have planned for our DLC is very exciting. We're doing a mockumentary based on all the footage that was cut out of the expansion pack; the characters commenting on everything that was cut, poking fun at it. We have another DLC package that I think is the most exciting thing we've put together for the *Saints Row* franchise. It makes me smile like a child thinking about it. ■

Splinter Cell: Blacklist

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Toronto
Format 360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Release Out now

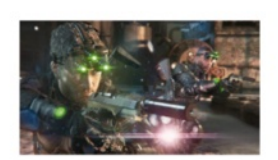
Blacklist is a series of answers to questions posed in the wake of *Splinter Cell: Conviction*. Why can't you move bodies? Why must you kill everyone? Where are the gadgets? Where is Spies vs Mercs? Well, now you can, you don't have to, they're all here, and it's back. *Conviction* was yanked from the depths of development hell with a speedy *that'll-do-just-ship-it* approach and was a surprisingly successful rescue job, but *Blacklist* was planned and directed like a laser to be all things to all players. Whatever you've found to like about any *Splinter Cell* game is here in quantities so extravagant that it's almost daunting, and in combinations so random that it's a disaster.

Blacklist pits the newly formed Fourth Echelon team against a terrorist group determined to attack the United States every seven days, and sends New Sam Fisher around the world to shoot (or not shoot) legions of insurgents and mercenaries in the name of truth, justice and the American right to invade foreign lands. From Fourth Echelon's flying fortress you'll choose your mission from the *Blacklist* campaign, the Spies vs Mercs multiplayer mode, a co-op/solo insta-fail stealth campaign helmed by Anna Grímsdóttir, skirmish-based terrorist hunts with Andriy Kobin, and a pure co-op campaign offered by and starring new agent Isaac Briggs. In *Chaos Theory* fashion, all the campaign missions can be completed without firing a shot, but in *Conviction* fashion it's more fun if you do. *Blacklist* has a way with a headshot – brutal, neck-snapping things triggered with a tap of the 'execute' button – and you're rewarded with cash for upgrades whether you play the game like a hunter, ghost or straight shooter.

The game awards more cash for leaving targets untouched and sneaking through its levels undetected, but it's all too eager to give you reasons to hunt. *Blacklist*'s levels are target-rich environments where enemies in their dozens flood into spaces built more for aggression than stealth. Where *Chaos Theory* had you sneak through darkened spaces populated by two or three thugs, *Blacklist* has you sneaking in broad daylight past six, seven, or – in Kobin's terrorist hunts – up to 20 heavily armed soldiers.

For the stealth-insistent, *Blacklist* is the most punitive game in *Splinter Cell*'s history. There are too many targets to evade and too little space in which to do it. *Blacklist*'s level design defies improvisation and ingenuity, and its checkpoint system denies creativity. It's possible to fail and be returned to a checkpoint in a location you never visited – high on a catwalk rather than in the downstairs vent you used on your first attempt, perhaps – or be dropped several minutes before the encounter that made you hit pause/restart, or the wrong side of a temporarily unskippable cutscene, or standing a few feet from a terrorist who will see Fisher if you don't immediately drop him.

The campaign missions can be completed without firing a shot, but in Conviction fashion it's more fun if you do



INJUSTICE LEAGUE
If *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* is an action movie, it's a superhero one. The secret-agent versions of The Avengers fight terrorists and their own differences to defeat an elusive super-criminal. Archetypal Stern Career Woman Anna Grímsdóttir is just trying to keep the team together but Stoic Black Soldier Isaac Briggs hates Comedy Nerd Charlie Cole, Captain America Sam Fisher hates Tame Supervillain Andriy Kobin, and Kobin hates everyone else. Cliché tennis ensues as inevitable double-cross turns into inevitable triple-cross, the terrorists' agenda is revealed to be a ruse, and the team unite for a game-ending montage that sets up the next generation of *Splinter Cell* games.

But Fisher is overwhelmingly powerful as an aggressor. His selection of mines and grenades turn him into a one-man army long before you use the brilliant Mark and Execute system to traverse the map three headshots at a time. He's so powerful, in fact, that headshot-resistant enemies, nightvision-equipped mercs and scent-chasing dogs are scattered throughout every mission, each restoring some sense of challenge at the expense of fun. It's as if Ubisoft Toronto designed itself into a corner – the enemies are so numerous and the spaces so small that Fisher needs his gadgets to manage the crowds, but his gadgets are so powerful that the game needs special enemies to counter them. Those enemies work well in a hunt-and-kill playthrough but are infuriating when attempting a Ghost run, and that's only compounded by a checkpoint system that forces a risk-averse playstyle, and level design that offers very few options in the first place.

Extravagant quantities, disastrous combinations. And so you play it safe: no risk, no fun, always taking the prescribed option. For all the choices *Blacklist* offers there's always a conspicuous path of least resistance – a path that will be more exciting, more visually arresting and will generally make you feel as cool and sexy as the new cool and sexy Sam Fisher. *Blacklist* can be made a pure stealth game or a pure shooter if you have the will and the bulletproof sense of calm for the job – but just because you can doesn't mean you should.

***Splinter Cell* used** to be built like a Clancy novel; now it's an action movie. Where a novel can find drama in the smallest moments – a man hiding while a lone guard probes the darkness with a flashlight – modern action flicks are obsessed with spectacle and constant one-upmanship. And so *Blacklist* has explosions and chases and extended platforming sequences and sniper missions and firstperson missions and missions against the clock and missions upon missions where being undetected feels like an exploit rather than a victory. Pure stealth was the most graceful way to play classic *Splinter Cell*, but here it's the ugliest option as the game constantly urges you to take the shot, take the shot, take the shot. Even the asymmetric Spies vs Mercs mode has been given a big dose of adrenaline with extra players and lights everywhere, although a Classic mode reduces the headcount and does its best to ensure that *Blacklist* appeals to everyone, with no player left behind.

By the time you reach the end of *Blacklist* everything has grown so big and so explosive that you're left exhausted but not entirely satisfied, and maybe after all that incoherent action you'll recall the time when a single flashlight in *Chaos Theory*'s Panamanian bank made you hold your breath. Ten men searching for Fisher doesn't make for ten times the excitement, but it sure does give him a lot to shoot.

6





ABOVE *Blacklist* litters every mission with extra objectives. There are separate awards for completing the mission in Panther, Ghost or Assault style, plus a memory stick to find and a high-value target to abduct



TOP *Blacklist*'s dogs are a tedious addition to *Splinter Cell*'s stealth systems. Their 'tells' are poor, their detection abilities allow them to spot Fisher hiding in shadow and even behind closed doors, and their unpredictable behaviour makes them a consistent reason for failing a pure stealth run. ABOVE The frequent daylight missions force players into a different kind of stealth, and while it's possible to sneak every mission, the path of least resistance and maximum drama involves exposure. RIGHT Fisher started the *Splinter Cell* series intensely vulnerable, but *Blacklist* Fisher is powerful from any angle and entirely capable of dealing with any threat, no matter how potent or numerous. It can make for a thrilling fight, but hiding is tension-free as a result



Post Script

Interview: Patrick Redding, campaign director

Patrick Redding joined Ubisoft Toronto from Ubisoft Montreal, where he directed *Splinter Cell Conviction*'s co-op campaign. We talk to him about *Blacklist*'s political agenda and the difficulties of having a videogame protagonist address a real-world issue.

Typically *Splinter Cell* picks a fictional enemy, but *Blacklist* touches on American intervention in the Middle East. Is that a risk for a blockbuster game?
I think it's a natural evolution of the way *Splinter Cell* has held a lens up to the world as the general public sees it. The original *Splinter Cell* was tapping into an interesting power fantasy: someone so skilled and so competent that you could insert them into a situation before it turned into a crisis, and if he did his job correctly no one would ever know. I think in the last 12 years, that fantasy has been exploded. There's this perpetual tsunami of information we're bombarded with every waking moment. There is no Santa Claus, no Easter Bunny, no Sam Fisher solving all your problems – and whether or not you believe the threat is exaggerated and we live in a time of semi-intentional hysteria, that's the perception the world operates under and you're reminded of that every time you go to an airport. We don't live in a world of pre-empted disaster, we live in a world of ongoing disaster. As a consequence we have had to recontextualise Sam's mission, for better or worse. Sometimes it's depressing, but we're not making Spy Kids; we are making a story that supposedly lives in the real world.

But when the terrorists' motive is the withdrawal of American troops or the spread of information, is an agenda many are pursuing by peaceful means a good motive for a videogame bad guy?
The reason we decided to go with that as an agenda was because it was simple to communicate. I think we've laboured under the difficulty of having a complex storyline that a player is actually going to be able to absorb useful information from. When you're reading a novel and there's 18 layers of obfuscation going on, it's fine because you have an opportunity to absorb what's happening. Going from literature to film, there is a problem with complexity and how much people can absorb, so, generally speaking, things get simplified. In games it's interesting: you have a lot of time to figure things out but the reality is that unless it's directly implicated in the low-level gameplay experience, players become frustrated with a complex plot.

Guantanamo, Benghazi, torture, extraordinary rendition, strikes on innocents, media hysteria and freedom of information are all mentioned but never really commented on. What is their value to your team if you're not willing to pass comment?
We're not making a game about the War on Terror, we're making a game that's about the dynamics of stealth and action and infiltration. The setting hopefully resonates with that deeper mechanical meaning by putting the player in environments where those kinds of activities have some special context. The role that locations play for us, it's not window dressing, but it is a kind of a mirror. It's holding a mirror up to the gameplay by setting it in an environment where the scenes matter on a much larger scale.



"We now live in a world of ongoing disaster and as a consequence we've had to recontextualise Sam's mission"



Fisher tortures people, and at one point threatens to murder a man's wife and child. Does that not make it hard to feel like a hero?
It's an interesting question: is Sam a hero? I think there are a lot of creative discussions to be had about the extent [to which] you can make a character an antihero before [players] stop being sympathetic. It's a struggle because you're always making choices about what systems and game mechanics you're investing your time into, and that means some things will happen as narrative moments. I think we're showing that Sam lives in a world where people do terrible things, but they think they're doing them for good reasons. [The terrorist leader] Sadiq asks Sam, "Why am I the bad guy here when we both kill for something we think is important?" We ask the question, but the player needs to answer it for themselves – and if that feels like a cop out, it's only in so far as you're watching a non-interactive sequence. I believe [gameplay is] where the important decisions are going to be made. What we said was, "Focus on the mechanics that give players choices in terms of their own strategies and their own ethical view of the world."

***Blacklist* is Ubisoft Toronto's first attempt to address Jade Raymond's notion that major games can take on sensitive topics. Can you go further?**
We can go much further. I think the reason why those sorts of topics have been the purview of indie developers is because they're the ones creating games where the mechanics are actively tackling those issues. It's true that there are [difficult] themes in the plot and world design, but our game mechanics are those of a thirdperson stealth-action game. We haven't scratched the surface of actually making a game that's *about* that stuff. To me, that's where we need to go. That's the next step. Figuring out how to let players mechanically explore those themes in a way that allows them to confront the issues head on. Otherwise, like everything else in the world, it's just something on a screen in the background while you're scrambling your eggs. ■


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The Wonderful 101

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Platinum Games
Format Wii U
Release Out now

During the fourth encounter with a particularly hard-wearing boss your suspicions are finally confirmed. Like its titular heroes trying to bridge a gap without enough members, *The Wonderful 101* has been stretched too thinly. And when that drawn-out boss fight repeats itself *immediately* afterwards – the fifth time you'll face this same foe – Platinum's colourful Wii U debut will sorely test your patience.

It's all the more galling given the short-lived controversy when director Hideki Kamiya said that his focus was on fun, not duration, and that anyone put off by the thought of finishing a game in a day should avoid *The Wonderful 101* altogether. Platinum's executive director Atsushi Inaba quickly clarified that players shouldn't be concerned about the game's length and that Kamiya simply meant you "shouldn't pad your game with content". Unfortunately for Kamiya, it looks like someone insisted that he did just that.

The Wonderful 101 is spread across nine Operations, each broken into three sections – usually two levels and a set-piece boss fight, though you'll face a number of mini-bosses along the way. The first Operation is a breathless rush through Blossom City as an invading alien force called the Geathjerk rains down destruction. New enemies are steadily introduced, as are fresh abilities for your heroes, and a puzzle that sees you move your characters around the inside of a warehouse on the GamePad's screen in order to solve a combination lock displayed on the outside delights through its clever use of the unwieldy controller. And while you'll be struggling to understand exactly what's going on in that crowd of characters you're apparently controlling, everything is new and exciting enough to set aside the initial bafflement.

Repetition soon sets in. The variety of enemies you've just met, it turns out, constitute a good chunk of the game's entire roster. Operation 007 – set inside the body of a character for plot reasons we won't divulge here – opens not with some new biological threat but shrunken-down versions of same enemy types we faced in Operation 001. Operation 008 does, too. That aforementioned quintet of boss fights isn't the only example of major enemies coming back to haunt you: many escape death after you've chipped away at colossal health bars, their mocking laughter as they fly off becoming steadily more galling the more the trick is repeated. Elsewhere, Platinum gets plenty of mileage from some weak, repeated impressions of *Viewpoint*, *Punch-Out!!* and *Panzer Dragoon*.

A less bloated campaign would, however, have done little to solve more deep-rooted problems. *The Wonderful 101* is never anything less than a spectacle – the sheer number of characters and enemies onscreen at any one time, combined with a litany of colourful attack effects and wonderfully solid-looking levels – but it's one that, mechanically, is difficult to read.

The GamePad frequently fails to recognise what you're asking for and it can take several attempts to get right



You control the lead member of your ever-growing party, the rest of the throng following you dutifully. You can extend that party into a single-file Wonder Line using the right stick or GamePad touchscreen, creating bridges and ladders out of thin air where necessary, rescuing (and subsequently recruiting) civilians, or even rebuilding broken items such as lifts or tanks.

It's perfectly readable at first, but then the fighting starts. Small enemies are at times lost in the middle of your following party, while large ones obscure your view of the group. All those visual effects make it difficult to distinguish enemies' stunned animations from their attack tells, too, and you'll be taken by surprise often as a result. Worse still, you'll frequently be hit by long-range moves from offscreen enemies due to an isometric camera that zooms in on your current fight.

At its best, it does feel like a Platinum game. The sense of impact as your giant weapons crash into enemies is commendable, enlivened by subtle slow motion that kicks in a beat before your strike. Switching between those weapons is less satisfying, however. Your party has the ability to congeal into several different Unite Morphs, which you can call upon by drawing shapes with your Wonder Line. A straight line generates a sword, for example, a circle a fist, and a wavy line a whip, while many more are introduced as you meet new heroes along the way. The larger the shape you draw, the bigger and more powerful the morph, though at a cost: your Unite Meter, topped up with batteries found around the level, will take a larger hit.

It's an intriguing system in principle, but not in practice. The GamePad frequently fails to recognise what you're asking for and it can take several attempts to get right. And while beginning to draw also triggers slow motion, it's an awkward process often interrupted by an enemy's attack, requiring you to gather up your stunned team and try again. You'll soon wish for a simple selection menu or button shortcuts, and we quickly found ourselves defaulting to the easy-to-draw sword morph rather than experiment with our other options during battle. It's telling, too, that one upgrade you're able to apply later on makes the line faster to draw with the right stick, which comes off like a tacit apology for requisite GamePad functionality.

The Wonderful 101 draws on ideas from Kamiya's previous games – *Viewtiful Joe*'s cartoonish charm, *Okami*'s brushstroke mechanic, *Bayonetta*'s setpieces – but in concert they're messy, hamstrung by cluttered visual design and a clumsy central mechanic. Stretched over a large frame, they wear thin quickly. There's a good game in here, but it's smothered by the need to conform to its host platform's feature set, and a distorted concept of value for money.

6







ABOVE Wonder Red, the leader of *The Wonderful 101*, is supported by a variety of uncomfortable gender and racial stereotypes, including Wonder Black, a black character introduced via a breakdancing sequence

TOP Even if you aren't always sure what's going on, it's difficult not to get lost in the beautiful visuals. Drawing a shape then hitting X will create splinter groups that will attack the nearest enemy. **ABOVE** You can't see them, but there are dozens of heroes underneath this enemy. Scenery can also obscure your party on occasion, while the viewpoint makes certain jumps awkward. **RIGHT** *The Wonderful 101*'s attack prompts are highly reminiscent of the ones used for *Bayonetta*'s Punish and Torture attacks. Big set-piece battles on falling masonry also feature regularly throughout, but never quite live up to their counterparts from Platinum's defining production



Rayman Legends

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montpelier
Format 360 (tested), PC, PS3, Vita, Wii U
Release Out now

Despite some bad blood having been spilled towards the end of *Rayman Legends'* gestation – Ubisoft Montpelier staff were furious to discover they'd crunched for six months to finish the game, only for its release to be postponed by the higher-ups as a Wii U exclusive became a multiplatform release – none of that gore appears to have seeped into the creative groundwater. This is one of the most jubilant, vividly imagined and open-hearted platformers to come along in a long time. To play it is to vicariously experience the development team's abiding love of videogames, and to be reminded why you love them too.

The Glade of Dreams is in peril once again, as the Bubble Dreamer has had a series of ever-more-terrifying nightmares in which the adorable, blue-skinned Teensies have been imprisoned. Each stage contains a total of ten Teensies waiting to be freed. Eight lie scattered throughout the course of the level, while a special king and queen Teensie are tucked away in hidden rooms. Each time you stumble upon a door leading to one of these chambers, you're alerted by an "oooh!" of wonder from an offscreen audience.

These discrete areas allow the design team to think in microcosm. It's not uncommon to find these challenge rooms occupying a single frame, as if they were plucked from a mobile game. This genealogy becomes explicit in one puzzle that appropriates the liquid physics and mole-burrowing mechanics of *Where's My Water?*, but replaces liquid with scalding magma and finger swiping with the frog-pixie Murfy, who buzzes about in a looping flight path, excavating only when you hold the B button.

Murfy is a sporadic presence throughout the game, always careful not to outstay his welcome, automatically zipping over to the nearest obstruction. In his more mundane contributions, he drags platforms between two points, slices horizontally stretched ropes to create handholds for Rayman to leap between Tarzan-style, and rotates puzzle elements. His more memorable contributions include gouging cycloptic plants in the eye so they belch an updraft that Rayman can ride into the sky, or tickling a hulking Minotaur until it drops its guard, providing you an attack window.

The delayed release has allowed Ubisoft Montpelier to pack in a staggering amount of content, with six different themed worlds, each containing roughly ten levels. Once you've completed each one, they can spawn an Invasion – a timed challenge in a bespoke version of the stage with its own accompanying leaderboard and three new Teensies to free, amusingly strapped to fireworks. There's the fourplayer Kung-Foot minigame that looks like football but feels like a horizontal 2D version of air hockey with face-palming own goals. There are two unique female characters to unlock in each world, achieved by completing a special bonus level where you are pitted against threats such as rising quicksand or a wall of flame. Then there are the unlockable Back To Origins stages, taken from *Rayman Origins* and remastered for your nostalgic pleasure.

This is one of the most jubilant, vividly imagined and open-hearted platformers to come along in a long time



Ubisoft also used the enforced delay to add boss fights to the game, and it's a good thing too. These encounters add exclamation points to the end of each world, acting not as arbitrary difficulty spikes but as rewards for making it through the preceding stages: an enormous luchador who must be ground-pounded on his scalp, the criss-crossed Band-Aids that reference King Hippo from *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* acting as your crosshairs; a robotic dragon in a stage modelled on *BioShock*'s underwater metropolis; and even a smoke monster for Lost fans, because... well, why the hell not?

In the Olympus Maximus world, there are giant serrated blades attached to the walls in cheerful tribute to *Super Meat Boy*'s sawblades, although the character physics in the two games could barely be more different. *Super Meat Boy* allows you to make nimble mid-air corrections to your leap; Rayman and his supporting cast, on the other hand, are controlled in a floppier, less responsive manner. If you make an errant leap it can be extremely difficult, even using the glide manoeuvre, to steer your way safely back to the platform you just left. *Legends* forces you to judge your leap correctly on the first attempt or pay the price. Thankfully, checkpoints and heart pickups are generously placed.

Even though time is only a scoring concern on the Invasion levels, the game is built around the concept of racing lines, and many levels will drop in a pursuing threat to force you to hit that line or die trying. The game's designers use strings of collectible Lums as perforated guidelines to help you discern the optimal path. The racing analogy becomes even more apt when you realise that you press the right trigger to make your character sprint. When you've memorised a level back to front, it feels intensely gratifying to make it to the finish without once letting off the gas.

You enter each stage by leaping inside a canvas propped on an easel – a fitting device, since the UbiArt Framework engine enables the game's visuals to carry a painterly aesthetic. *Rayman Legends* seems to draw its inspirations from a deep pool: Lewis Carroll, Salvador Dali, Tim Burton, even Ren & Stimpy.

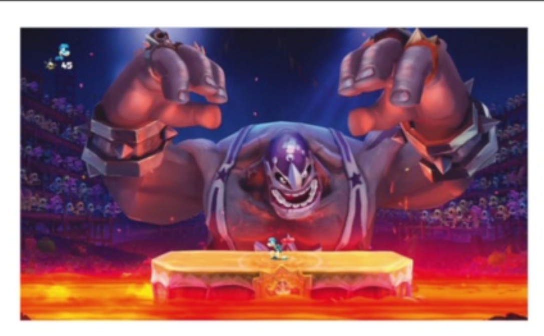
Modern 2D platformers rarely reward you for studying the scenery, but *Legends* teems with inspired flourishes, such as the purple Mini-taurs cleaning cavern floors in one Olympus Maximus stage – perhaps a winking reference to all the extra polish added during the game's delay. It may well have been a great game at its initial deadline, but the staggering level of detail in its amplified incarnation helps it run rings around its already estimable predecessor.

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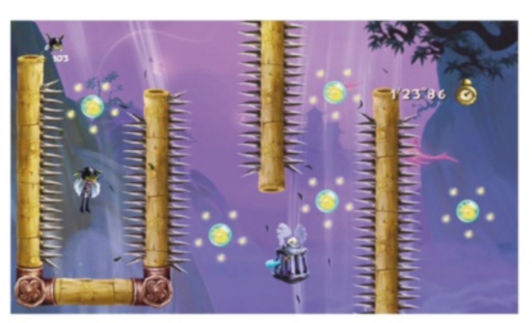
ABOVE The Fiesta De Los Muertos stage has such a candy-sweet colour palette that it makes being dead seem like the most delightful state of affairs you could imagine. Those spiky worms are all too eager to help you get there, too.



LEFT In this stage – inspired by *BioShock*'s underwater metropolis Rapture – *Legends* adds the sea dragons that were regrettably absent from Irrational's outing. This one chases you, snapping its jaws at your sprinting heels



RIGHT The design of *Legends* takes great pains to remain coherent within its surreal framework. Instead of this luchador boss pounding on a floating stone platform for no reason, instead the platform is a crowd-riling drum



BELOW This challenge stage resembles a spike-hell room from *VVVVVV*. Collect all the bubbles in each screen before time runs out

The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

Publisher 2K Games
Developer 2K Marin
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

Goodness, what a retcon. *The Bureau*'s been tweaked and retrofitted so many times now that the poor thing suffered a downgrade from reboot to prequel. What once styled itself as the shiny new face of alien invasion now finds itself a background story to last year's successful, unexpected resurrection of the turn-based strategy genre, which we're pretty sure presented itself as first contact at the time. Still, within the ignominious diminishment of prestige lies an opportunity. With *XCOM*'s long-term fans sated thanks to *Enemy Unknown*'s tactical charms, *The Bureau* can freely be its own game.

It does it in style. Sixties style, to be precise, and 2K Marin has captured the era's cigarette-smoke-filled air of paranoia and pointed in the direction of a different invasion to the one the real America was readying itself for. In a sense, the themes are all wrong: the Cold War was about paranoia, distrust and McCarthyism, elements better encapsulated by the creeping dead and suspicion of Invasion Of The Body Snatchers than in *The Bureau*'s much more literal, lasers-and-abductions take on alien invasion. But, well, the style's there: you get to dress up main character William Carter like your very own early-seasons Don Draper, and he does look rather dapper in that fedora. More importantly, perhaps, while your home base might lack most of the tactical decisions found in *Enemy Unknown*, it's still a lavishly decorated set to visit between missions, themselves set in quaintly charming small-town America, where the hay's never looked so golden nor the homecoming banners so welcoming.

Still, what you do in that base remains limited. Without *Enemy Unknown*'s management and base building, *The Bureau*'s HQ occasionally feels like a hangover or, worse, a limitation. You can engage in conversations with the scientists and military brass hanging out in the period-authentic labs and command centres, but you can't chat with your agents, since they're disposable bundles of stats and perks. When you do talk, there's *Mass Effect*'s dialogue wheel but none of its relationship building. Every now and then you can perform an 'Investigation', an anaemic errand-boy quest within the base, one of which was so laughably simple we couldn't quite believe it. Sent to search for a secret compartment in an AWOL agent's office, we strolled into their workspace only to be confronted by a gleaming painting, highlighting its sudden interactivity. The code to the safe was on the shiny picture tacked to the opposite wall.

It's an atmospheric space filled with incidental touches all the same: engineers work in hallways, radio operators smoke cigarettes to the stub, new recruits can be a bit sexist, and everyone's face is lined with Cold War tension and topped with period hair detail. The base also contains the mission select menu, which does in fact feature some strategy. Alongside main missions – drawn-out, cutscene-heavy and crucial to the story – you can take agents on optional missions that usually offer experience alongside some technological rewards, and even send squadmates not currently in your party on missions of their own. This is as strategic as *The Bureau* gets. Each of these side-missions has a points value that the combined level of the agents you send must be equal to. It's a little less complicated than the *Assassin's Creed* games' assassin management, but it successfully provides a layer of asset control to the game while also conveying that very *XCOM*-feeling that there's more going on than you can handle alone.

2K Marin has taken Mass Effect's cover-heavy combat and built a tactical shooter around it



To be fair, protagonist William Carter can handle a great deal alone, and even more with two other agents by his side. The agonising impotence of watching a Muton blast your point man's face off isn't present in *The Bureau*, since it's been swapped out for the rarer, but equally frustrating, experience of watching them bleed out from across the room. What 2K Marin has done here is taken *Mass Effect*'s cover-heavy, squad-power-based combat and built a tactical shooter around it, handing over finer control of party members to the player. You can queue instructions: sending an engineer into a specific position to summon a turret, for instance, before using a commando to taunt an Outsider Elite into its killzone. You'll need to make use of these power combinations too, since aliens pour into arenas with alarming frequency. You get swamped regularly in *The Bureau*, especially on higher difficulties, where battles quickly turn into sieges as you desperately hold the fort with your defensive powers while waiting for your offensive ones to recharge.

It's challenging, then, but often not particularly tactical. Despite flanking bonuses and abilities designed to utilise them, *The Bureau*'s most dangerous foes aren't the Sectoids and Outsiders, which try to use cover, but things like Mutons and Sectopods, which effectively charge at the player while soaking up ammo and all the powers you can throw at them. Equally reticent to stay in position are your very own teammates. We can tolerate them needing babysitting and direction – that's rather the point – but their autonomy is inconsistent. One moment they'll wander away from the flanking position you suggested; the next they'll stare a Muton defiantly in the eye while making a suicidal last stand.

The Bureau's focus on squad management and abilities gives it a rhythm distinct from other thirdperson, cover-based shooters, and combat provides a solid, often intense and engaging core on which to hang 2K Marin's terrifically well realised '60s America. It's a slick slice of B-movie alien blasting, in short, but we're glad it's standing alongside a more authentic take on *XCOM* rather than wearing its visage but not quite acting the same.

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RIGHT It's exciting to see a game straddle genres like this, especially one in a series we hadn't previously seen for years. *The Bureau* borrows *Enemy Unknown*'s visual signatures to represent cover and damage percentages





LEFT Carter's Ghostbusters-style backpack conveys a passive stat bonus. Different packs are frequently the reward for optional missions, and you'll often find fresh schematics in the field



BELOW The populace in plenty of *The Bureau*'s invaded towns have been turned into 'sleepwalkers' – zombies who can turn combative at any moment. There's a dash of Cold War double-agent paranoia



Killer Is Dead

Publisher Deep Silver
Developer Grasshopper Manufacture, Kadokawa Games
Format 360 (version tested), PS3
Release August 30

That *Killer Is Dead*'s Gigolo missions should generate such pre-release furore will likely be a source of amusement for a provocateur like Goichi Suda. Not least because he considers them little more than palate cleansers, relaxing changes of tempo from the blitzkrieg combat of the game's main missions. The objective in these sections is to win women over with presents, raising protagonist Mondo Zappa's blood pressure by turning his gaze from face to chest and below, while ensuring you're not caught looking where you shouldn't. Eventually, you'll bestow them with a gift, and if it's to their liking, you'll take them home.

The natural reaction is to roll your eyes and clack your tongue, but this seedy aside seems more silly and misguided than genuinely objectionable. It's unrealistic to the point of ridiculousness: success is greeted with a casual thumbs-up to camera, while there's a bizarre roar when the two get down to business. It's entirely at odds with the treatment of the rest of the female cast: three of the game's most important characters are women and none is overtly sexualised. Ultimately, it's a half-baked extra that can be ignored unless you're desperate for upgrades to Mondo's gun – and besides, you're better off fully upgrading the basic shot type you begin with. The game may well have been better without it, but one suspects Suda is under pressure to cater to an audience that may not have bought *Lollipop Chainsaw* for its raucous invention and subversive humour. Tellingly, you can play these missions with one hand free.

Whatever your stance on the Gigolo missions, they give the game a marketable hook when otherwise its publisher might struggle to find one. *Killer Is Dead* is peppered with all of Suda's usual idiosyncrasies, and therein lies the problem. Characters break the fourth wall, often undercutting the narrative tension; there's dramatic use of an unlikely piece of music (here it's the fourth movement of Dvorak's New World Symphony); cutscenes feature plenty of dreamlike imagery and rather heavy-handed symbolism. But these Suda staples are beginning to feel tired, as if its creator's fecund brain is beginning to run on autopilot. If you've not played any of his games, you may be dazzled by some of the stranger turns the plot takes. But if you have, then a chase between a motorbike and a tiger feels oddly familiar, while a depressed demonic locomotive barely raises an eyebrow.

Still, it marks a welcome return to darker thematic territory after the schlocky horror shows of *Lollipop Chainsaw* and *Shadows Of The Damned*. Despite the odd wisecrack, Mondo Zappa is a serious-minded protagonist, and as his unknown past gradually comes to light, you'll see why. The narrative is unsettling, partly thanks to some violent, hallucinatory imagery and a typically unhinged score from Akira Yamaoka, a man who could make an episode of Peppa Pig sound sinister. It trades in dreams, buried secrets and the unreliability of memory, and while the structure of the game makes it one of Suda's more episodic plots, it comes to a satisfyingly bleak close. And if one of its biggest revelations is hardly a new concept for a Suda game, the other, happily, is a genuine surprise.

With Suda we've come to expect the unexpected, but the unexpected has become predictable

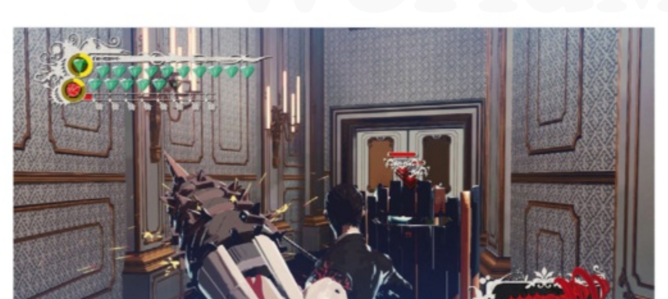


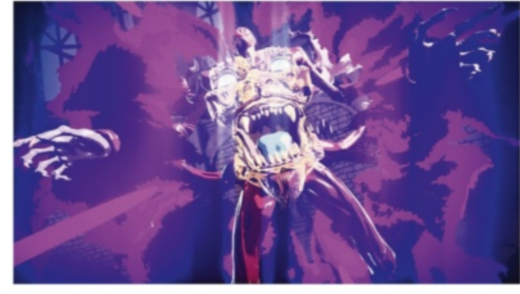
It's not the only one. *Killer Is Dead* has Grasshopper's most satisfying combat since *No More Heroes*, compensating for the lack of physical sensation with more varied and flexible systems. Mondo's katana attacks connect with weighty force, partly thanks to some explosive sound effects and the rumble feedback that gives your palms a ferocious buffeting. Don't expect the depth of a *Bayonetta* or the daring invention of *Metal Gear Rising*'s parry mechanic, however: combat here prioritises dodges and counters. Indeed, the later you take evasive action the better, as a filter bathes the action in red and you mash the X button to launch a flurry of rapid blows. The variety of enemies, meanwhile, ensures you'll use Mondo's entire range of light, heavy and charged attacks, a moveset that steadily expands when you spend gems dropped by defeated enemies. Again, none of these ideas is particularly new, but there's an arresting rhythm and flow to the action, and given how many games in this genre are blighted by camera woes it's a pleasant surprise to discover that *Killer Is Dead*'s is mostly problem-free.

Though avoiding attacks is crucial, with enemies ruthlessly punishing mistakes, aggression is also encouraged. Successive blows build up Mondo's blood meter, powering Musselback, a mechanical arm cannon and drill. It's a useful solution to gun-wielding foes, and can also peck away at the health bars of hardier enemies, assuming you can create sufficient distance. QTE finishers are used with uncommon restraint, reserved only for the most extensive combos. It's challenging enough on Normal difficulty that you'll die a fair few times, though the money you earn from commissions can be spent summoning Mondo's unbearably shrill assistant to perform CPR.

Even taking deaths and restarts into consideration, the dozen missions are over in around seven hours; fewer if you don't bother with the sidequests, which vary greatly in quality. Though it doesn't outstay its welcome, the final act sees the plot hurtle towards a climax that arrives too soon. It's a shame the outrage about those Gigolo missions will overshadow everything *Killer Is Dead* does right, but in truth, it might otherwise be soon forgotten. With Suda we've come to expect the unexpected, but the most disappointing thing about *Killer Is Dead* is that the unexpected has become predictable. By adhering too rigidly to its creator's esoteric template, it gives us pretty much exactly what we were anticipating.

6





ABOVE The best of the sidequests return you to previously visited areas, offering shorter missions. Some feature unique objectives, and it's worth playing through them once if only to boost Mondo's bank balance



TOP There's pleasure to be had in simply exploring the attractive and stylishly rendered settings, from a Japanese garden to a high-end audio emporium and, of course, the surface of the moon. The art quality compensates for a few minor technical concerns. ABOVE Stunned enemies can be instantly killed with an Adrenaline Burst move, though it consumes a large amount of your blood meter. Your supply can be topped up by finding Scarlett, a nurse who usually hides behind secret walls or within breakable objects. RIGHT A successful repeat of the same Gigolo mission is enough to earn you Mondo's fourth and final gun attachment, the charge shot. It releases a powerful blast, capable of taking down a few smaller enemies at once, though on the harder difficulties you'll rarely get the space to use it





Papers, Please

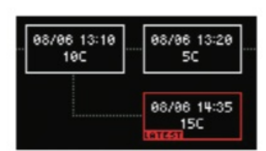
Papers, Please is about freedom. About granting it, taking it away, and discovering how much you can snatch for yourself in a world where something as fundamental as what you do for a living is strictly controlled. It's a stark, bleak game of surprising thematic unity, and a powerful demonstration of the kinds of stories players can take part in, even when their own agency is strictly restrained.

Papers, Please casts you as an immigration officer for a fictional Soviet state, which has recently reopened its borders. The mechanics surrounding this idea coldly study not just the powers wielded by such bureaucrats, but also the strange tedium found in exercising them: people's lives hinge on the way that visa stamp falls, and in order to retain your job you must scour documents in search of contradictions. There's a dry satisfaction in spotting someone trying to illegally sneak into Arstotzka, certainly, but if the process sounds thrilling then we're being grievously misleading.

There's a certain tactile pleasure in working with these documents, thanks to the papery rustle of work permits and passports, the skilful weaving of tutorials and updates into your handbooks and daily memos, and the satisfying thwack of a freshly stamped visa rejection.

Granting entry to immigrants generally seems nicer than rejecting them, but it's worth keeping in mind that your homeland is far from a utopia – as the state of your home life and family finances can all too easily attest

Publisher/developer Lucas Pope
Format Mac, PC (version tested)
Release Out now



TEMPORAL AMENDMENT REQUEST

Papers, Please's story mode lasts 31 days, which is about five hours of realtime play. The save system, however, is masterfully designed to encourage repeat play. Reload the game and you'll see a timeline of your progress, allowing you to jump into specific points earlier in the game to see what might have happened had you, say, not split up a couple across the border because only one of the pair had the correct papers.

You can't be lulled too gently into the rhythm of a working day, however, because you have a family to feed, and immigration officers get paid on commission. Your familial commitments aren't drawn in the same greying, artfully impoverished detail as your working life, though: 'home' is little more than a spreadsheet of incomings and outgoings that pops up at the end of each shift.

As the game continues it adds complexity in two ways, the first of which is a Kafkaesque increase in the number of forms to be checked and compared. This gets fiddly and awkward, which is presumably the point. The second is a slow drip-feed of unusual, unexpected requests from the characters – applicants, officials, diplomats and guards – who appear in your booth. Sometimes these are little more than one-shot stories but they may, depending on your decisions, start a plot thread that runs through the rest of the game. These stories are the soul of *Papers, Please*: tales of sedition, corruption or plain human misery that always come down to paper and the horrific way it can dictate lives.

Games have mastered action – the amplified and instant reward – but *Papers, Please* finds satisfaction in the tedium of bureaucracy, and twins it with genuinely human stories and an underlying, dread-filled tension. It's rare to play a game about something, about a time, a place and a theme, and for a game to embody those ideas from meaning right down to mechanics.

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Divekick

Publisher Iron Galaxy Studios
Developer One True Game Studios
Format PC, PS3 (tested), Vita
Release Out now

Good jokes rarely need explaining, but *Divekick*'s central gag will be lost on all but the most committed fighting game player. It's a parody of the titular move, which lets players interrupt a jump with a sharply angled kick to vary their angle of approach.

Divekick began life with just two mechanically identical characters, using two buttons, one each for jump and kick, with a single hit enough to win a round. It was the fighting game in its purest form, a test of reads and reactions.

That's still the case, but much has changed. There are 13 characters, each poking fun at a figure or facet of the genre and its competitive scene, with a slightly different moveset. It's even more of a niche proposition now: only committed followers will know that Jefailey is based on a famously egotistical tournament organiser – his head grows in size after each victorious round. Few will know that Stream's win quotes are memes plucked from the chat channels of Twitch tournament broadcasts.

This expanded scope – which includes a super meter and both aerial and ground-based ways to use it – has undermined the game's original spirit. While anyone could play the original *Divekick*, every match with a novice must now begin with a patient explanation of the chosen fighters' idiosyncrasies, which rather misses the point. What had the potential to showcase to the uninitiated what makes fighting games so special has become a game aimed too squarely at those who already know.

6



One Finger Death Punch

Publisher Silver Dollar Games
Developer In-house
Format 360
Release Out now

One Finger Death Punch's simplistic control scheme belies a game of remarkable challenge and depth. Your stickman avatar stands rooted to the spot in the centre of a fixed 2D plane; waves of grey enemies advance from either side and all it takes is a tap of either X or B to dispose of them. To start with, anyway: before long you're dealing with colour-coded foes who require multiple taps in different directions, and Brawlers, whose appearance causes a *Guitar Hero*-style cascade of button prompts to tumble down the screen. That's a fine reference point: this, too, is a game where success means slipping into a Zen-like state where you're not looking at the screen so much as through it. As Bruce Lee once said: "Don't think. Feel."

There's plenty of variety in the scores of bite-size stages strewn around a sprawling world map thanks to different objectives (destroying scenery, deflecting incoming projectiles) and backdrops. There are weapons, too: our favourite, the spiked Death Ball, can be volleyed at foe after foe, speeding up with every kill.

Style can triumph over substance: at busy times it's hard to track the action amid the explosive hit sparks and fountains of claret, while weapon pickups and slo-mo kills can throw you off your rhythm. This is delightful stuff regardless, and with three difficulty levels, a survival mode and a raft of perk-like active skills, *One Finger Death Punch*'s content belies its 80MSP price point as much as its controls disguise the depth of its systems.

8



Pivvot

Publisher/developer Whitaker Trebella
Format iOS
Release Out now

Pivvot resembles nothing so much as *Super Hexagon* married to one of those fairground tests of skill where you guide a metal loop around a twisting wire without touching it. If it owes a debt to Terry Cavanagh's modern classic, however, it takes its ideas in intriguing new directions.

Tapping either side of the screen rotates a ball attached to a moving track, as you negotiate a series of geometric hazards, with patterns appearing sequentially rather than randomly. Voyage mode tasks you with mastering the same pattern six times before moving onto the next, a total of 29 times until you reach the finish line. Yet it soon dawns that this is merely a way of training your muscle memory to cope with Endless mode. Here, again, the patterns appear in the same order, but often they're subtly changed from the previous attempt: a second clockwise turn may work on one run and see you smash into a spike on the next. Memorising the combinations of taps and holds to conquer each obstacle can only get you so far, not least because the track's unpredictable paths frequently disorientate: patterns can be harder to parse when the track turns upside down.

It may not demand quite the same precision as *Super Hexagon*, though its irregular rhythms make it every bit as challenging – you'll pass the barrier for 'completion' a little sooner, but Berserk mode is waiting for you… Compulsive and beautifully tuned, *Pivvot* is a tense, nervy challenge to relish.

8



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p120, where we chat to affable *Civilization* mastermind Sid Meier, who discusses the strategy genre and the future of gaming. In Places on p122, we return to *Super Mario 64* – the first ever recipient of an **Edge** 10 – and Princess Peach's Castle for a nostalgic look around the pioneering 3D hub. There's some more retrospection in Things, on p124, where we travel all the way back to **Edge** issue one with launch editor Steve Jarratt, who reminisces about the magazine's genesis and reveals that at one point he considered leaving out game reviews altogether. In Studio Profile on p126, we visit *Project CARS* creator Slightly Mad Studios, whose London HQ draws upon the skills of over 80 developers scattered around the globe. The Making Of... on p130 looks at how Sweden's two-man indie developer Simogo made *Year Walk*, an atmospheric, intimate and morose game inspired by the country's folklore – and Downton Abbey. Finally, our columnists look back over the past 20 years of videogames, with Tadhg Kelly (p134) deciding that a game's quality boils down to the simple equation of "If it's not fun, it's no good". Clint Hocking (p136) says he owes everything he's achieved in gaming to his Commodore VIC-20 and a vague promise Captain Kirk made to his mother, while James Leach (p138) casts his eye across history to consider all of the game characters he hates, from *Street Fighter*'s Blanka to Sonic the Hedgehog.



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The complete issue one of **Edge**, featuring a Testscreen section whose inclusion was under debate during the magazine's development process. Today, launch editor Steve Jarratt says that he's "shocked how many reviews we crammed in"



People

SID MEIER

On the dawn and rise of Civilization

Meier on *Civilization*: "It has a universal appeal – people didn't need an instruction manual to know electricity, gunpowder or the wheel are going to be useful"

Success in the videogame industry is cyclical and capricious. Like empires, the great genres rise and fall, often collapsing into dust or years of stasis. The strategy simulation, so dominant in the early '90s, fell away with the arrival of the firstperson shooter – and even that mercurial genre has seen plenty of casualties. 3D Realms, id and Parallax Software, the godfathers of the immersive blaster, have all floundered. Now strategy is back, with *Dota 2*, *StarCraft II* and *Crusader Kings*. Everything flows.

But somehow the *Civilization* series has remained, and with it the game's creator, **Sid Meier**. Although now more of a behind-the-scenes figure at his studio Firaxis, Meier is still designing, prototyping and providing input on every iteration of the series that cemented his fame. "We've been safe in our little niche. We always had a connection with strategy gamers, so there was no need for us to do what other studios were doing. We weren't ever the hot new thing, but we had the best game in its genre."

Ironically, though, when **Edge** launched in 1993, Meier had temporarily moved on to a music generation program called CPU Bach. "*Civ* had gone out and we were exhausted," he explains. "We put everything we could think of into that game. We said, 'Let's not try to top that right away – let's do something a little bit different'." The hiatus from strategy didn't last long. *Colonization* came next, then *Civilization* started calling once more. "It was the kind of game where people would write to us with suggestions and ideas about how we could improve it," he shrugs. "It took on a life of its own."

Twenty years ago, Meier was still at Microprose, the simulation specialist he set up with 'Wild Bill' Stealey in 1982. Thanks to hit franchises such as *F-15 Strike Eagle* and *Silent Service*, the company became a giant of its era with offices around the world and ambitions on new genres. But a mid-'90s corporate buyout by Spectrum HoloByte led to hubris, staff cuts and uncertainty. Meier left in 1996 to form Firaxis. "It was the right decision," he says today. "We were able to refocus on design with fewer corporate distractions. Microprose was a big company, and that brings a lot of pressure – what we enjoy doing is making games."

How does the modern industry compare? "Back then, we were pretty much shifting hardware every two years," he says. "We'd moved from the Atari as our main development platform, to the Commodore 64 and then a little diversion to the Amiga; then we moved over to the PC. And CD-ROMs were just happening: *Civ* originally went out on about ten floppy disks. Also, there were big changes in graphics and audio – *Civ* started out in 16 colours, with one speaker sound… The industry is a lot more stable these days. But that's not to say it isn't interesting."

After a few years in the specialist wilderness, strategy games are back. With *XCOM*, Firaxis made one of the most critically acclaimed titles of 2012, and elsewhere *Clash Of Clans* is proving that deeper tactical experiences are possible on smartphones. "What's interesting about strategy games is that the audience seems to stick with them for a long time," says Meier of the genre's hardiness. "We have a community of *Civ* players that have been around for 20 years, and they continue to come up with ideas and energise the game. I think the strategy genre has a part to play in whatever direction the industry goes, whether that's online all the time, or more about indie games, or these new consoles. Are we going to wear augmented-reality technology? I don't know, but our job is to go in whatever new direction the industry takes."

We talk a little about what Meier likes to play. Of course, he has explored strategy titles such as *Age Of Empires* and *StarCraft*, but he has also dabbled in firstperson shooters, surprisingly namechecking *Call Of Duty* as well as racing games such as *Gran Turismo*. He has watched the rise of the indie scene with interest. "Five or six years ago, you felt you needed a huge budget and there was a very limited pipeline – only a few people got to design and make games," he says. "Now there are so many distribution channels, so many places to find games; and the tools available are leading to this real explosion of creativity. There are so many more games than you could ever play. The problem now is finding them and finding the time to play them."

"There's a sense that something big is going to happen; I wish I knew what that was going to be"

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, it's *Minecraft* that he's been playing the most. We suggest there are interesting parallels with *Civilization*: both games are about providing the player with a creative landscape they must master. "It would be wonderful if we had anything to do with inspiring *Minecraft*," Meier laughs. "It was *SimCity* originally that introduced the whole paradigm that it's the *player* building the world. It's a very powerful idea. Games like *Civ* and *Minecraft* [make] the player the star, and what they end up with is unique to them. You don't get that watching a movie. In these games it's your own ideas, your own thoughts. Games that emphasise that are really taking advantage of this medium."

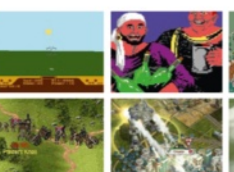
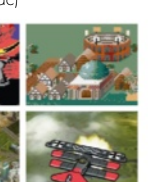
Meier is so amiable, so contented, that it's difficult to coax him into negativity or reproach. The closest we get is when we ask about how Zynga repurposed some of the key compulsion loops of the strategy genre into its *Ville* titles. "It did not really resonate with me," he says. "When I heard about the metrics and the compulsion loops – scientifically taking apart the psychology of gameplay – I can't relate to that. It's not where I start when I make a game." Where does he begin? "I take a topic I think is fun and exciting, and think of a way to give the player a sense of ownership over that topic – give them interesting things to do. I don't claim it's the *right* approach but it's the only one that works for me."

We ask about the future of gaming: where's it all heading? "I don't know! There's a sense that something big is going to happen; I wish I knew what that was going to be. Yes, we have all these different platforms, we have all this technology, we're constantly plugged in. Just about anyone can play games these days. So, do we all become game makers and stop being game players – is that what's going to happen? Does our life become a game? We're at an interesting crossroads."

Finally, would you still make *Civ* if you were a young designer right now? For a moment there is silence. "I see a lot of games out there today with hints and traces of *Civilization*," Meier says finally. "If I were just starting out as a designer today and *Civilization* didn't exist, I would have to make it… It still makes sense." ■



URL www.firaxis.com
Selected softography *Spitfire Ace* (1982, Atari 400/800), *Sid Meier's Pirates!* (1987, various), *Civilization* (1991, PC), *Sid Meier's Gettysburg!* (1997 (PC), *Sid Meier's Civilization V* (2010, PC/Mac)



Places

PEACH'S CASTLE

A return visit to the hub at the centre of **Edge**'s first 10, awarded in 1996

The same castle design was used in *Super Mario Kart 64*, for the venue where cups were awarded. It was a neat way of tying together Mario's day job and his karting hobby

From *Super Mario 64*
Developer Nintendo
Origin Japan
First release 1996

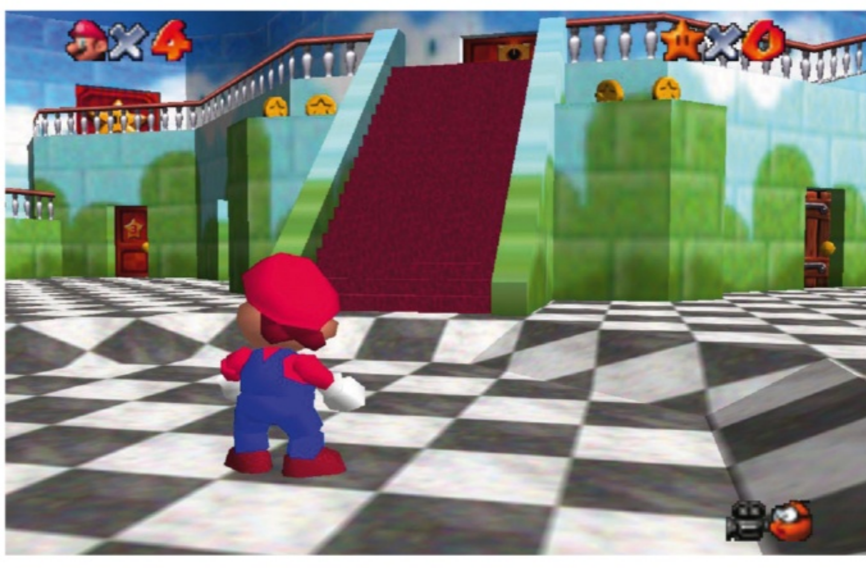
We could probably fill this whole page without even getting past the moat. After all, we filled whole afternoons without getting past it. The outside of Peach's Castle was 3D gaming's gentle introductory playground. It seems oddly sparse today: just a cluster of trees and a lake devoid of traditional game-like challenge. But that's the point. Nintendo built *Mario 64* on a foundation of technological breakthrough with its sprawling 3D worlds, but nothing but pure design and animation brilliance can be thanked for *Mario*'s supple, elastic controls. There was a joyous, bouncy pleasure in the sheer act of movement, and the open, undulating grounds of Peach's Castle were built for frolicking in.

What a contrast with all those locked doors inside. *Super Mario 64* didn't feature the first platform game hub level but certainly codified the form, since other aspects of its design meant the between-levels part of the game had to shoulder much more responsibility than before. A map screen is great when you've got the best part of 100 levels to lay out, but *Super Mario 64* only had 15. They were bigger than anything players had ever seen, designed for repeat visits and full of diversions, but the game needed a different means of tying the courses together.

From a functional perspective, then, Princess Peach's royal abode is pure padding – it takes *Super Mario 64*'s 15 stages and sprinkles them over four subdivided floors. Despite the gating it does so nonlinearly, a subtle clue that things had changed from the days when Mario's adventures were nothing but an epic journey towards the right of the screen. This was a space to be explored, with multiple entrances, exits and rooms you were meant to return to. Still, it's a relatively compact, tidy and efficient environment compared with the bloated hubs it would inspire: you could fit Peach's Castle many times over into *Donkey Kong 64*'s DK Island or *Banjo-Tooie*'s sprawling Isle O' Hags.

> It's a relatively tidy and efficient environment compared with the bloated hubs it would inspire

There was a weird, voyeuristic novelty in walking around the nearly abandoned dwelling. We'd visited the Mushroom Kingdom plenty of times, after all, but never been invited to potter about the royal residence before. So it was a surprise to discover Princess Peach was an avid art collector. Given *Mario*'s three-dimensional transition, there's something wonderfully symbolic about jumping into 2D paintings that then reveal themselves to be 3D worlds; it's easy to miss the simple trick they pull off. The painting gimmick doubles up as an economical piece of level design: *Mario 64* doesn't need to integrate its environments into its hub zone or provide plausible transitions between the hub and the courses – it just hangs them, like exhibits, on the wall. They're still logically placed, though: the entrance to the watery Jolly Roger Bay awaits beside schools of fish in the coolly lit aquarium; *Super Mario 64*'s final courses – the vertiginous Tick Tock Clock and sky-high Rainbow Ride – await in the castle's summits.



Peach's interior decorating clashes rather horribly, even if the landscapes recall the backdrops to previous *Mario* games

The strangest thing of all about Peach's Castle, however, is that it feels like a real place, an actual home to contrast with all the themed gauntlets hidden inside it. Peach's fondness for landscape paintings has an obvious design-related purpose, but there's no denying that by modelling and filling her castle with such curios Nintendo had made the Mushroom Kingdom more grounded than ever before. The brightly coloured, prehistoric charms of *Super Mario World*'s Dinosaur Island had been reined in favour of a blander, fairytale aesthetic and a castle that, frankly, would slot neatly into Disneyland.

Meanwhile, the layout of the castle was oddly plausible – the courses might be stuffed with enemies and tricky platforming gauntlets, but Peach's home was made up of nothing but long corridors and echoing rooms (there's a Boo-infested courtyard, but this is the otherworldly exception to the rule). Even a puzzle in which Mario must ground-pound two pillars to drain the moat outside was unusual – it loosely paralleled finding alternate course exits in *Super Mario World* to unlock new levels of the map, but its focus on the castle's mechanical workings was more akin to a *Zelda* temple than anything we'd seen in a *Mario* game.

A common criticism of *Super Mario Sunshine* is that the GameCube title's preoccupation with turning Isle Delfino into a consistent, unified place held back its level design – a misstep that it took *Galaxy*'s abstract droplets of play to correct. If that's true, then perhaps the first inklings of the impulse to make 3D spaces believable and consistent can be spotted here. As the *Galaxy* games managed to increasingly capture the purity of 2D *Mario* in 3D space, they whittled away at the hub until it was once again a map screen.

But they lost something in doing so. Before Peach's Castle, games like *Mario* were all about the rush to the level exit, the leap to the flag. But 3D worlds dangled the possibility of more immersive spaces: places we could pause, dawdle in and explore. Peach's Castle was one of the first. It showed us a Mario who existed beyond the end of the level, a Mario without any immediate task. A Mario free to spend afternoons outside, somersaulting from tree to tree. ■



Things

EDGE

Launch editor Steve Jarratt on the creation of a different kind of game magazine

At launch, **Edge** was delivered inside packaging that did a fine job of obscuring the cover imagery

Publisher Future Publishing
Origin UK
First release 1993

When I was asked to launch a new multiformat videogame magazine, to fill the gap in Future's portfolio left by ACE, I was 31 and had a wide interest in technology. This ranged from CG and movie special effects to computing, home cinema and electronic gadgets. As well as being an avid videogamer, I was also interested in how they were made.

At the time, the industry was going through another of its regular Doctor Who-style metamorphoses. The days of one- and two-man coding teams had seemingly gone, to be replaced by studios churning out big-budget productions. CD-ROM offered new styles of gameplay (crap ones, as it turned out), and – with some obvious early exceptions – we were making the transition from 16bit 2D to 32bit 3D gaming. The SNES and Mega Drive were long in the tooth, the PC was beginning to make giant strides, and systems like the 3DO showed a glimpse of what was to come.

And, having mainly worked on kids' mags for almost a decade, it was time for me to do something different. I figured there must be other people like me, who had grown up with videogames and now saw it less as a hobby, more a lifestyle choice; this was an interest that would, in all likelihood, only be diminished by age and infirmity. Time to get serious.

So gone were the kiddy cutouts and cartoons, in came a much more mature design, with long-form articles and interviews, with detailed, well-informed reviews. Ah, reviews – the bane of **Edge**'s existence. At the time I'm sure I toyed with not having any reviews at all, but when you see how much mag you have to fill with features, it doesn't take long before the reviews go back in. And we still had to sell advertising, after all.

I was bored of traditional mag reviews and wanted ours to be a bit more considered and critical, with the gravitas of film reviews. I also decided against bylines, hoping that the team would all think alike (and discuss games together) and so the reviews would be delivered as the voice of **Edge**. However, I never intended for the mag to become self-indulgent. I rejoined **Edge** for a stint on issues 102 to 105 and at the time I remember reading a review and having no idea if the writer liked the game or not, so verbose and obtuse was the copy. Fortunately, the magazine has changed since then.



Search 'Edge' in Apple's App Store to find issue one of the magazine, which can now be viewed on iPad. The trip back in time will take you to the dawn of gaming's modern era

As the idea of the mag developed, so the structure informed itself. With the array of games machines available, we couldn't possibly be comprehensive so I decided to review only those titles that were technologically or culturally important; games that opened up new genres or fresh concepts in gameplay. Truth is, we pretty much simply reviewed games that interested us the most, and as a rule it served us well.

We won the InDin Best Magazine award – which in this market was a bit like being the tallest dwarf

Having said all that, looking back at issue one I'm shocked how many reviews we crammed in. I'm pretty sure that was due to my deputy editor, Jason Brookes, badgering me to keep adding new games he kept finding. I wish I'd stood my ground now, as the review section looks rubbish.

We'd also report on events from anywhere as long as they were newsworthy. Games mags had been fairly parochial up until that point, but with key developments going on in Europe, the US and Japan, it was my intention that the mag should feel truly international, with the price in dollars and yen to emphasise it. I wanted the mag to feel special, and the reader to feel part of a global community.

Once the mag had been staffed up, we started production in earnest and it was time to make a dummy issue – the fabled issue zero. This was standard operating procedure for mag launches: you make a 16- or 32-page section, and repeat it three or four times to create the bulk of a real mag. Then you go and wave it under prospective advertisers' noses to gauge reaction.

I do remember being really up against it and so instead of mocked-up pages, the dummy actually featured a lot of real content from issue one. But it did serve to highlight one serious issue: the magazine cover. We had some cool ideas about the structure of the cover, and the logo came to us really easily. Launch art editor Matt Williams' typography was great, but when it came to cover images I was stumped.

Despite supposedly covering 'cutting-edge' next-generation games, most of them only generated screenshots at 640x480 – if you were lucky. A magazine cover is usually about 250–300dpi, which isn't far off Retina display levels; blow up a shot of a 16bit game and it generally looks horrendous. And at that time, publishers weren't generating the beautiful CG 'target renders' that we've become used to seeing (often at Sony hardware launches).

So, after desperately scrambling around, Brookesy dug up a cool 3DO shot of a spaceship for issue zero. Sadly, the only image worth using for issue one was a blurry low-res image from *Microcosm* – which would only be outdone by the diabolically awful pic we used on issue two. Thank God the magazine was packaged in an opaque bag at that point.

I'm painfully aware that the first few issues weren't really that good, but unfortunately my aspirations were ahead of the gaming landscape at the time. I think it took a year or two for the magazine and its subject matter to properly mesh.

Still, by the fourth issue we'd won the InDin (Industry Dinner) Best Magazine award – which in this market was a bit like being the tallest dwarf. And then, by issue ten, I was done. When the first whiff of an 'official' PlayStation magazine arrived, I immediately threw my hat into the ring. And with **Edge** helping to convince Sony to give Future Publishing the licence, I was fortunate enough to be given the launch editorship.

The fact that I'm here, 20 years later, reminiscing on the launch of **Edge** is a testament to ~~my genius~~ the hard work of all the editors that followed me: Jason Brookes, João Diniz-Sanches, Margaret Robertson, Alex Wiltshire and, of course, **Edge**'s own Jedi guardian, Tony Mott. The initial concept might be mine, but the glory is, truly, all theirs. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Slightly Mad Studios

Into the London eye of a crowdsourced development storm

1 The *Ferrari Racing Legends* lineup.
2 Need For *Speed: Shift* brought a more serious, track-focused branch to the rowdy series.
3 This Pagani Zonda R model reveals the painstaking detail in *pCARS'* vehicles.
4 Pagani's hypercar, the Huayra, from *Shift 2*

The line between screenshot and photograph is of peculiar relevance to Slightly Mad Studios. For one thing, its game *Project CARS* (aka *pCARS*) blurs it on a regular basis with lighting and shaders so good that even an untextured car can look real. What's more, it does it in realtime, unlike the Photo Mode sorcery of games like *Forza* and *Gran Turismo*. And what's even *more*, it's not near finished.

A grand experiment in crowdsourcing as a means of putting racing games back on track, freeing them of publisher fears and demands, it's the alpha that looks anything but. "We've promised you a game you can *play*," stresses creative director **Andy Tudor**, "and if the game isn't playable for some reason, we've got a responsibility to fix it as soon as possible. Currently *pCARS* has the lowest bug count of any game we've ever made, simply because we're getting feedback constantly and fixing as we go along."

That 'we' refers to the 80-plus developers scattered around the globe. Screenshot or photograph, then: how best to describe it? Surely not the usual landscape of monitors and whiteboards that, in the case of the studio's office near London's Tower Bridge, is home to few computers and even fewer people. No, better to look at the forum of its distributed network, World of Mass Development (WMD), where staff interface daily with some 80,000 players and contributors who've bought into *Project CARS* – the idea, the philosophy and the quest to make the world's most freethinking racing game. Or at Tudor's own desktop where HipChat ('hosted group chat for companies and teams') and Skype are permanent fixtures, and a pillar of green lights suggests a disciplined regime.

"Every studio has a studio culture, and ours is built on faceless contact," Tudor explains. "It's about using the forum to talk to each other. A conversation you can have with a programmer about what they're currently working on can be seen by every boss in the entire company, down to the most junior guy who's just joined. So you've got to be honest, nice to each other, and deal with things in a proper manner.

"It would be difficult to take an existing studio and transfer it over to this system, I think, because you lose that Friday pub culture and replace it with one where people only really communicate via Skype or conferencing."



No shortcuts here. Those still sore after *Grid 2*'s cockpit snub will be delighted by *pCARS*' commitment to them

Nothing new, of course, for the studio that started out making mods for what would become legendary racing sims *GTR* and *GT Legends*. Splitting from Simbin to form Blimey! Games in 2005, 20-plus staff became about 60 working in the same virtual environment as a mod team, but one now formalised to cope with mainstream, console, mobile games… whatever.

Founded in 2009 following the insolvency of Blimey! Games publisher 10tacle Studios, Slightly Mad made its name quickly with the *Need For Speed: Shift* series, tasked with steering EA's glitzy racer into more credible driving territory. What managing director Ian Bell announced next – a best-of-class super-sim built on an extensible crowdfunding platform – is more fully described in **E**255's preview. Suffice it to say that it's a truly colossal undertaking that simply couldn't have worked without the ethos and track record of the team in the middle.

"Nothing we put up there has any marketing spin on it. We don't release a trailer to gee up the numbers"

"When I walk into the office in the morning and turn HipChat on, I'm online and people can see that I'm online," Tudor says. "As long as everyone does that and gets the work that they've been told to do done, it doesn't matter. If you need to pick up your kids at one in the afternoon, that's fine, just say you're going to be away for an hour and pick your kids up. If you're late to work because, like me, your car broke down the other morning, then you don't need to start making excuses.

"That's the studio culture here. Everyone's honest with each other, everyone gets the work done, and you can do it from your own home wherever that may be in the entire world. So, we actually attract really good talent because, unfortunately, studios are closing more and more nowadays. People don't want to relocate, and they don't *need* to relocate with our system. You can sit at home in Scotland or in Spain – it doesn't matter."



Founded 2009
Employees 80+
Key staff Ian Bell, Andy Garton, Andy Tudor, Ged Keaveney, Stephen Baysted, Darren White
URL www.slightlymadstudios.com
Selected softography *Need For Speed: Shift, Shift 2: Unleashed, Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends*
Current projects *Project CARS*; unannounced online racer

Tudor describes three pillars of WMD that, he accepts, would sound more at home in a medical or legal practice. "Trust, faith and honesty. The trust is there with: you give us your money and we promise to deliver all the things we've said we will. One of those is giving you a game you can play right now. I'm involved in a bunch of Kickstarter projects where I've never even seen the game. I think of those projects as when I give my friend money to run a marathon: it's a donation, but I'm not really involved. 'Did you do it? Brilliant, good for you.' With WMD we need your feedback now or we're just doing the same thing we did for all our previous games: sitting in the dark for two years making a game, hoping that the decisions that we've made are good."

As for faith, Tudor says: "People have put a lot of money into the game, a huge amount [€2,299,015 at the time of writing], and they can only do that in the knowledge that we've delivered on our games in the past.

"The last thing was honesty. Honesty means complete transparency in everything we do. We're very honest in our screenshots and trailers; nothing we put up there has any marketing spin on it. We don't release a trailer to gee up the numbers. Maybe when there's a competing product out there… 'Oh, *Grid 2*'s out this week. Community guys, *maybe* it would be good to get a trailer out there.' We don't mean it in an evil way, but we just want to remind people that there are other games out there. We don't make as much noise as other titles do because they have huge marketing departments behind them. But we do have a legion of really devout fans who can generate as many screenshots and trailers, and as much forum talk, as they have time to do.

"People always ask, 'How many cars are going to be in the game? When are we going to get this track in the game?' All that is legal stuff that goes on in the background, but we tell you





The cockpit view of *Need For Speed: Shift* (left) uses motion blur and camera shake to make the player feel more like they're in the driving seat. *Shift 2* (above) offers new cars, Autolog and an evolved helmet cam that looks towards the apex of corners and responds to G-force

when it comes. We don't save something and then release it as a surprise. Literally, as soon as the pen is on the paper, we put it up there – like the BMW announcement, things like that. We'll tell you when it's there, as opposed to having a strategy of releasing one a week to keep the hype going. No, we'll just be very honest with you: 'We signed this, there you go. It'll be in the game next week.'"

The same goes for the game's proposed business model (formerly free-to-play, now traditional digital and boxed retail thanks to going multiplatform) and any bumps in the road, such as a recent brush with the Financial Services Authority that put WMD's crowdfunding on hold. There has been some back-and-forth with the UK watchdog, and while Tudor says negotiations have been cordial – "They agreed we weren't breaking the rules but would need to change a few things here and there in order to carry on," he tells us – Slightly Mad agreed to cease raising money through WMD at the end of July. Those who have already backed the game are entitled to refunds, though anyone who wants their money back will no longer receive new builds or a slice of the game's eventual profits.

Like most things *pCARS*, the whole situation with the FSA has seen a furious cycle of developer commentary and community feedback. But when Tudor promises "business as usual" for the game and its creators, you only have to be a WMD member (a tiered system of packages not unlike Kickstarter's buys you access and influence) to believe him. This is what really separates Slightly Mad from the average hopeful on other crowdfunding services: it has very little to prove. Those involved with the project will often use the past tense when talking about its value: as a joint expedition to the frontiers of graphics, simulation and a world beyond traditional big-budget publishing, most believe that it has delivered already.

Few would question Slightly Mad's priorities, either. *Project CARS* is progressing so well in so many ways that it'll come as a shock to many to know that Gamagio, the social and mobile outfit responsible for the highly rated *The Walking Dead: Assault* for iOS and Android, among other games, is essentially the studio's alter ego – what the team does to "keep its minds healthy", as Tudor puts it.

"Gamagio was started up because we wanted to work on mobile titles, and we wanted to get our foot in [the door] in terms of technology that worked on mobile games as well. A lot of the games we worked on previously were very serious – semi-sim, action sim, realistic action racing, whatever you want to call it. But they are not shooting zombies in the head, trying to build dams for beavers, and things like that. Other companies do this, I'm sure, but we've found it really helps because when you don't have the same social atmosphere as in a studio, that is maybe missed. You can obviously grab somebody online and talk to them about their weekend, but having something you can work on maybe one day out of five is really good for the staff. It keeps their minds healthy when they're otherwise working in the dark trying to fix horrible bugs."

> What separates Slightly Mad from hopefuls on other crowdfunding services is it has very little to prove

A slightly different role is filled by *Biker Bash*, a second WMD game that, with its low profile on the company's forum and visibly gestational status, steals little limelight from *pCARS*. It's there, though, should *pCARS* members want to try their hand at conceiving what Tudor calls a "*Road Rash* for the next generation, a really cool, next-gen-looking bike game where you use mechanics from, like, *Street Fighter* and *Fight Night*".

For the foreseeable future, *Biker Bash* is perhaps best considered as a reminder to developers intrigued by WMD's crowdsourcing model that it's not all about *pCARS*, or even Slightly Mad Studios. "The platform is there to allow not just ourselves but other companies to make triple-A games – and the concept of that is shifting, you can get triple-A mobile games now – that involve the players," Tudor states. "If there's a tagline to it, that's the tagline. *Project CARS* is the first project on there, and we opened up the platform to allow other people to submit their proposals and things like that. What we gather, though, is that people are waiting for us to fail. People are thinking, I imagine: 'All right, let's see what happens. Let's see if they actually succeed'. A lot of Kickstarter projects fail, and there was a bit of a backlash recently about that. So I think everyone's kind of waiting for the game to be released and see that we did it."

With Double Fine's Kickstarter darling *Broken Age* burning through its funding recently, *pCARS*' open-topped approach to funding is a sensible one. The transparency that sees players try out new cars while the ink is still drying on the licensing contracts doesn't hurt, either, since there's never a question of where the money's going. "New things come along," Tudor notes. "Oculus Rift comes along, 4K TVs come along, Xbox One comes along. There are always new opportunities that are really desirable, and if the community believes that as well then the [funding] limit can go up. So think of those as stretch goals in Kickstarter terms."

We can't share details, but suffice it to say that Tudor's not just paying lip service to the impending 4K revolution. Meanwhile, Oculus Rift support is already going in. And there's one more final tease before we leave Slightly Mad's London office, out into the world where *pCARS* actually gets made.

"We've had a game out every two years since about 2005," Tudor says. "*Project CARS* is our current game and we have another racing game that we're working on. Yes, another racing game, for a publisher. It's not through WMD, it's going to be very different from *Project CARS*, and it's going to be an online racing game. And I think you'll have to wait for more announcements soon." ■



Andy Garton
Development director,
Slightly Mad Studios

Where are you based?
In Tring, Hertfordshire.

What does your typical daily work routine consist of?
I have a young family, so I'm usually up around 7am. The great thing about working from home is that my commute is only 15 seconds up the stairs, so I get to enjoy helping my kids with their morning routine, and walking with them to school. Our principal communication system internally is a customised forum system, which means I can check for urgent issues early in the day.

I'll then hit my home office to start my work morning, and I generally try to take an hour for lunch – usually involving a walk with the dog, or a bike ride. I'll occasionally treat myself to a longer lunchtime curry also, taking my iPad with me so I that can keep in touch with work.

Typically I'll finish my main working day around 6pm. This means that I get the chance to spend some time with my kids before they go to bed. After that it's a simple task for me to quickly check the forum and email to see if there's anything that needs my attention; the danger here of course is that work can begin to play too big a part in my evenings, but on the other hand I find it a positive thing that I can resolve something straight away, and quickly, without having to go to bed worrying about doing it the next day.

Given that you were involved in other SMS projects, like the Gamagio games, how did they slot into your schedule?
I was involved to some extent. By and large we try to dedicate a sub-team to each project, but the beauty of the forum system is that every staff member has full visibility on all of our projects. This means, for example, that they can give feedback on game design discussions, as well as help with additional playtesting if they wish. As such, I always try to get involved as much as I can while also maintaining focus on my main priorities.

So what's it like to crunch when you're working from home?
It's brilliant! No, it isn't really. As a company, we decided a couple of years ago that enough was enough, and that routine crunch clearly wasn't the best way to develop games. In the long run it's extremely counterproductive, of course, as it can lead to the loss of vital team members through stress and burnout.

Saying it is easier than doing it, sure, but I think that we're doing a pretty good job – meaning that our staff members get to enjoy a proper work/life balance. It almost sounds flippant to say it but a happy worker is a better worker, so we're not taking this approach entirely for altruistic reasons!

Related to this is our strategy of becoming as independent from publishers as possible. As every developer knows, being at the mercy of a publisher at every milestone when you need to pay staff isn't a great position to be in. Again, it's easier to say this than to achieve it, but with things like the WMD development model we're getting there.





Audio director Stephen Baysted (above centre) and creative director Andy Tudor (above)



THE MAKING OF…

Year Walk

How a Swedish studio used its country's native folklore to take us down to the woods for a big surprise

The Brook Horse, *Year Walk*'s most distinctive character, is a pale equine creature that lives in lakes and tempts children to ride on its back before drowning them. Surreally Scandinavian, it captures the spirit of Simogo's game perfectly

Format iOS
Publisher Simogo
Developer In-house
Origin Sweden
Release 2013

You begin hungry, alone and cold. As the clock chimes midnight, you open your front door and venture out into the cold Swedish night. You have fasted. You have locked yourself away from human company, and you have even shunned the warmth of the fire. Now you are ready to embark on your solitary, perilous journey.

Heading through the dark forest, you hear the noise of your footsteps in the freshly fallen snow. Somewhere overhead an owl hoots in the trees. Supernatural creatures lurk in the darkness, ready to drive you mad. If you make it to the church, the most dangerous part of your walk still awaits: an encounter with the goat-headed 'Church Grim'.

The medieval Swedish tradition of 'årsgång' (or 'year walking') sounded like the plot of a videogame long before it inspired one. A vision quest, a spiritual journey that purportedly rewarded the brave – or desperately reckless – with a glimpse of the future, it was designed to test the walker's mental and physical strength.

"There is something about the structure of year walking in itself that lends itself so well to a game," explains **Simon Flesser**, one half of indie development team Simogo. "I mean it's a quest of sorts, with a very clear goal and trials to overcome."

Ironically, though, Simogo's award-winning 2D firstperson adventure game *Year Walk* didn't begin life as a videogame at all. In 2012, Swedish screenwriter Jonas Tarestad gave Flesser a screenplay to read called Årsgång. Infused with themes from Swedish mythology, an assortment of weird creatures and a dark love story, Årsgång couldn't find the funding it needed for movie production. So Flesser and his Simogo co-founder **Magnus 'Gordon' Gardebäck** proposed turning it into a videogame instead.

'Arsgång' was a spiritual journey that rewarded the brave – or the reckless – with a vision of the future

Best known for the cartoon-like art style of *Kosmo Spin*, *Bumpy Road* and *Beat Sneak Bandit*, the Malmö-based developer seemed an unlikely studio to tackle mystical quests that come with a whiff of sulphur. But, according to Flesser, it was something he was ready for.

"We had been talking for so long about doing something more sinister, and doing it in an elegant way that didn't feel like your typical gory horror game. While the script was definitely horror-oriented, it had a very unique tone that clicked really well with our ambitions."

After *Beat Sneak Bandit*'s release on iOS in February 2012, Simogo officially started work on its next project. Like a year walker listening to the clock strike midnight before venturing out into the dark, its new title would be a leap into the unknown. What would the team find? And what would the future hold? No one was quite sure.

***Year Walk* is** a unique title not just for Simogo, but for the App Store itself. Nestled among familiar, colourful timewasters such as *Angry Birds* and *Fruit Ninja*, this haunting, 2D puzzler has the art style of a Gothic-themed popup book and the circular narrative of a Jorge Luis Borges short story. It belies the often-stated truth that simplicity is the key to iOS success.

Far from easily graspable, *Year Walk* treats its audience with startling indifference. You begin trudging through the snow – the crunch of fresh snow underfoot just one of many atmospheric audio effects – with no idea where you're going or what you're supposed to achieve. There's no title screen, no opening logos and no tutorial.

"We wanted to communicate a feeling of insecurity and being lost," says Flesser of the game's spartan UI. "It was also important to us to break free from the confines of what a game must have, to make it feel truly special. In many ways it feels just as much like a silent movie or interactive pictures as a game."

The sense of disorientation also fed into the game's music. Simogo spent much of early development cycle listening to Elephant And Castle, a 2011 album by Swedish musicians Matti Bye and Mattias Olsson. Its jaunty yet creepy fairground vibe has an ominous feel. If Jack the Ripper and Dario Argento ran a Victorian carousel, they'd probably pipe it in as musical accompaniment.

For *Year Walk*, Simogo wanted to discover something equally haunting and jarring, and the team found it in the work of fellow Swede Daniel Olsén. He describes his evocative soundscape for the game as a mix of "Swedish folk and electro acoustic music, mystery and melancholia". It certainly is disturbing, a discordant mix of old-fashioned music-box melodies and more orchestral pieces that blend with the sparse sound effects: creaking floorboards, snow trampled underfoot and hooting owls.

Originally conceived as a thirdperson adventure, which would have been in keeping with the perspective of Simogo's previous games, *Year Walk* evolved during the early stages of development into something more intimate.

"At first, it just didn't feel like a Simogo game could be viewed from a firstperson view," says Flesser. "But then I started to think about adventure games like *Ace Attorney*, or *Another Code*, in which many scenes are actually viewed from a firstperson view, and it suddenly didn't feel as unfitting." The first prototype, put together in March 2012, was designed to showcase the shift in perspective to firstperson 2D. Walking through the game's snowy, almost monochrome environments is like being inside a picture. You navigate left and right using screen swipes and move forward and backward through set depths. Exploring the wintry woods you discover misshapen babies, strange symbols carved into trees and wooden outhouses where creepy dolls hang from strings in the darkness.

"The main purpose of the prototype was to make the illusion of walking in 3D, even though everything is layered 2D," says Gardebäck, who handles the coding side of things at Simogo. "We learned a lot about the look and feel of the actual transition between 'rooms', and also of the interaction itself. We always aim to implement a control scheme that feels natural."

That firstperson perspective in 2D environments gives the game space a strange, disorienting feel. It also adds to the mounting sense of horror as the story itself unfolds. Daniel, the player's character, meets his girlfriend Stina in the mill and learns that she's destined to marry another man. He decides to take a year walk on New Year's Eve to see what the future holds, ignoring her advice that it may be dangerous.

It is a rare moment of human contact in a game largely populated by uncanny creatures. Haunting the forest is the Huldra, a strange and silent fairy with twig-like hair and clasped hands. She's joined by the game's most memorable creation, the Brook Horse – a humanoid nag dressed in Edwardian clothing which emerges from a forest lake.

"I wanted the creatures to feel unexpected in their appearance," says Flesser of the Brook Horse, whose Victorian-style suit was inspired by BBC costume drama Downton Abbey. "I wanted them to have this odd sensation of not being 'quite there'. I mean, they are there, and they are looking at you, but in many ways it feels like they are also completely indifferent to you being around them, which I think gives them all a very mysterious aura." ➋

Year Walk isn't a fight-or-flight survival horror. There are no weapons and no scenes in which you're chased through the game's environments. There's not even a fail state – beyond being stumped on how to proceed next. Instead, the horror is psychological: the slow drip, drip, drip of foreboding as the game pushes you inexorably towards its inevitable finale at the church.

If you visit the minimalist but brightly coloured office of Simogo in Malmö, you might be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the *Year Walk* puzzle box. Crafted by Flesser's former colleague, Magnus Eriksson, the box is a real-life recreation of the game's most enigmatic item, a wooden chest with a shape-coded combination dial.

Placed near the start of the game, the box is infamous for being a frustrating puzzle – an object that apparently serves no purpose. You can even complete the game (at least the game's first ending) without opening it. But, judging by the chatter in Internet forums, it's an item that casts a strange spell over players: too obviously important to be brushed aside as a red herring, yet too cryptic to be easily solved.

That it should have become a real-life item on a shelf in Simogo's offices, albeit one that doesn't actually open, seems fitting. *Year Walk* is a game that exploits the intersections between reality and dream-like states, paradoxically immersing players in its world by explicitly taking them out of it.

It's something that's laced into the very game design itself. On the most basic level, you need to keep a pen and paper beside you while you play, to jot down strange runes and map the labyrinthine environments. But it's there too in the puzzles themselves, which make innovative use of the iPad touchscreen.

The game's most fully realised puzzle – a search for misshapen murdered babies called Mylings – is one that asks you to go beyond the environments themselves. You get the sense that there is a larger world hiding beyond the edges of the screen, one that you can only access by escaping the frame surrounding the game space by 'walking' your fingertips out of it, or by turning the iPad upside down to reveal a hidden ghostly infant hiding above you.

"It's one of the highlights of the game," says Gardebäck of the Myling puzzle, explaining that it was also one of the first parts of *Year Walk* to be implemented. "We wanted *Year Walk* to have this feeling of being more than what is on the screen," Flesser continues. "We wanted it to feel like the player had awakened something



Jonas Tarestad
Screenwriter,
Year Walk (short film)

What was the origin of the short film script?
I wanted to write something short, seasonal and Swedish, so I flipped through a book of Swedish folklore that I'd bought a couple of years earlier. In it I encountered the phenomena of 'årsgång', or year walking. I had never heard of it before and immediately felt like writing about it. It had the Mylings, an enormous rotting sow called Glosoen and the Church Grim, who was called the Night Raven for some reason. He was not a goat at this point, though.

Why didn't it become a movie?
It was mainly due to funding. I guess I knew it would be more or less impossible to finance before I even started to write, but I felt like writing it anyway. Good thing I did. There are no plans to resurrect the screenplay – Daniel's story has been told as far as I am concerned – but I will most definitely return to Swedish folklore. There are more tales to be told.

How much changed from the original short going into the game?
In the script, the year walk is act three. This worked well for a film but it doesn't work in a game. You have to year walk on your own, so every secondary character from original script was cut; Daniel was stripped of his personality and became more of an avatar for the player.

ancient that is far too big to understand, and how that would drip out into their world because of it." Generating a cryptic mystery that crosses out of the game itself is something that finds its greatest expression in the *Year Walk* Companion app. An interactive encyclopaedia written by Swedish folklore expert Theodor Almsten, it was released separately on the App Store. Bringing the player deeper into the experience by paradoxically taking them out of the game, the Companion illustrates Simogo's willingness to experiment with metagaming.

While many originally thought the Companion was nothing more than a glorified guidebook, it is actually an essential part of *Year Walk*'s grand puzzle. Without it, it's impossible to crack the game's second ending involving the wooden puzzle box. It's explicitly perverse: the game's first puzzle is the one that can only be solved last – by leaving the game itself.

For Flesser, the idea of letting the interactive world bleed into reality is fascinating. He's surprised it hasn't been explored more. "When you are going through all those notes, especially the hidden journal notes, you are effectively playing the role as yourself. You are an investigator unravelling the mystery of all these events that started on that cold night. That concept – of players roleplaying as themselves in their own world – is really intriguing."

To date, *Year* *Walk* has been downloaded close to 150,000 times – which, at a premium price of £2.49 ($3.99), is an achievement. "It's been overwhelming and for us, being a small studio, the numbers are great," says Flesser. More pleasing than the revenues for Simogo, though, is the creative confidence the game's success has given the team. "It was a gamble, both creatively and financially, but we have this philosophy that we can, to some extent, afford for every second game to be a financial flop," Flesser explains. "But the biggest pressure for me personally was definitely creative. It would have been discouraging to see something we believe is so unique flopping. I think I unconsciously told myself that it would have been proof that everyone just wants the same thing over and over again."

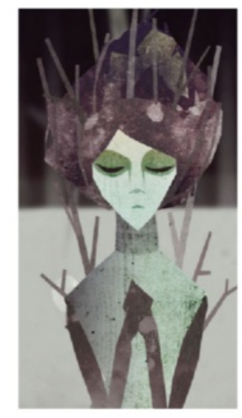
Instead, *Year Walk* has helped the fledgling studio expand its vision as it heads into its fifth project, *Device 6*. Flesser says that this surreal thriller will explore the metagaming concept further. "It's overall an even more minimalistic and slower experience than *Year Walk*. In many ways it's doing the opposite of where a lot of gaming is going: no explosions, no action [and it] requires a lot of reading and thinking."

Most importantly of all, *Year Walk* proved that Simogo's unusual take on what an iOS game can be offers rich and innovative returns. Received wisdom says that *Year Walk* shouldn't have worked. IOS is, after all, the home of numerous physics puzzles and endless runners with in-app purchases layered in. Simogo's success with *Year Walk* showcases the potential of the platform to do something unique.

"I think that me and Gordon being 'motvals käрringar' [literally 'opposite waltz hags' in Swedish] has a lot to do with us making a game like *Year Walk* on iOS," Flesser jokes of the studio's contrarian approach to game development. "We made it in an 'OK, we're going to do this just because someone says we shouldn't or aren't allowed to' way. I think that runs through everything we do at Simogo." In an era of prequels, sequels and me-toos, Simogo's approach is undeniably refreshing. This is a walk that's well worth taking. ■









Early design sketches (far left, above) feature the first Brook Horse, scrapped because "it looked like Kevin Spacey". The Huldra (left) is a Norse guardian of the forest and key to one of the game's best jump shocks



Cut it out

Simogo's list of influences on *Year Walk* range from Swedish folklore and *The Legend Of Zelda* to Matti Bye and Mattias Olsson's 2011 collaborative album Elephant And Castle. One slightly less obvious inspiration was Russian animated short Hedgehog In The Fog (1975), directed by award-winning Russian animator Yuri Norstei. "I actually know very little about it. I just love it, it has such a unique tone, and I've watched it so many times," says Flesser when asked about the ten-minute movie. The story of a hedgehog travelling through a misty landscape to have tea and jam with its bear friend, Hedgehog In The Fog is considered a masterpiece of Soviet-era animation. "The cutout style inspired the animation in *Year Walk*, as did the odd perspective. The way it imitates 3D but still retains the edge and charm of 2D was very much an influence. What I like most is the atmosphere of it: it's lovely to watch animation that is not coated in Hollywood sugar."



Stina is the game's only other human character and the most important part of its time-travelling narrative. Players who have completed both endings still speculate on the possibility of a third. "No comment!" says Simogo's Gordon Gardebäck



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Plus ça change

When you look back at games over the past 20 years, do you see much of a difference? I don't mean surface-level changes like sharper graphics, but the fundamentals – how games play, how people relate to them, what games seem to be able to do well, and what they struggle with. We often say that games exist between the yin and yang of revolution and evolution, and there's some truth to that. Big shifts are often brought on by the introduction of new technology that expands our control or access.

So much so that few people are really able to keep pace: define 'games' in terms of PCs and consoles, and the world is off playing games on Facebook and mobile phones. Even now that conversation is moving on – maybe it's wearable games next. Maybe microconsoles.

Evolution, on the other hand, is the process of incremental shifts. It's the mid-console cycle, the slowly building franchise and the quietly changing genre. (The use of 'evolution' here is misapplied as it implies a sense of directed growth, but it is what it is.) *Grand Theft Auto III* to *Grand Theft Auto V* is evolution. *FIFA 94* to *FIFA 2013* is evolution. *FarmVille* and *Clash Of Clans* may be what evolution *actually* looks like when applied to games, but that's not how we see it.

Overall we buy into a story of progress. On a long timeline we approach a zenith where games become more, grow beyond and upend. They sit at the head of the media table as cultural generators, like sports currently do. Simultaneously they take over from Hollywood, eclipsing the passive arts with their interactive descendants.

That, with some shimmies back and forth, is the 20-year narrative through which **Edge** has lived. And it's false. Games are not levelling up. They are what they are, the little fun engines that could. They're not on a timeline, they're just doing what they do. People play them or not, find meaning in them or not, become addicted to them or not. Always have, always will.

Consider the million or so examples released since the videogame was invented, and you will see a lot of similarities. You're generally involved in logistic, puzzle-solving or skill tasks, and trying to win. There's also the sense of endlessly repeated near-misses. A game's story is only ever a shade of what it's supposed to be, but next year's game will supposedly change that. The simulations are always on the verge of being real, yet the players seem to drift off to simpler 'pew pew' fare. We're supposed to be on the verge of an artistic revolution, but it's competitive action-fantasy stuff like *Dota 2* that gains all the attention.



Games are not levelling up. They're not on a timeline. They are what they are, the little fun engines that could

Videogames seem to have a way of working that we find hard to pin down, and yet is unmistakable. It's wrapped up in the modality of play, of what the play brain perceives and does when faced with a gamelike situation. The same neurons that lead you to look at *Tetris* as a sorting problem engage when playing *The Last Of Us*, whose overall dynamic is essentially a quest for shivs and sneaking opportunities. The limits of control and the need for physicality are all a part of games too. The effects of lensing and the problems of synchrony persist.

But most of all the fun constant remains. For all the things that a game could be, there remains the sentiment that if it's not fun, it's not good. If all that seems negative, consider this: games may have constraints, but so do music, theatre and other art forms. That's what 'form' means. There are borders and realities that artists need to work within, and that means some stuff just doesn't work.

When it does, there's magic. Another aspect of games that has never changed, and is as relevant today as it was in 1993, is what I called the thaumatic experience. I experienced it when playing *Doom, Wipeout 2097, StarCraft, Halo* and many others. Your particular thaumatic moments no doubt come from others.

But that sense of synergy from imaginative and functional engagement has never changed. Maybe at times we've thought of it as something smaller, like immersion, fascination or flow, but it has always existed. Part of the joy of videogames, and the reason why **Edge** was able to tap into a wider conversation from its inception, was because the sense of thauma was always there. Maybe we just didn't have a word to describe it.

I sometimes get stick for my kind of thinking. To many readers I'm shutting down games, saying that they're over and done with. What I'm actually saying is that over the 40 years that games have been developed, there were some design precepts that historically struggled, while others felt natural. Some game genres constantly struggle with their artificiality while others fit so naturally. When I say that we can begin to see what games are, it's based on that observation.

I believe the progression narrative – the one that likes to dress itself in revolution and evolution and talk of overcoming other artforms – is dated and destructive. It's driven by ego and a need to be recognised by the powers that be. Twenty years from now, I hope we'll break free of it and be comfortable with the art form we've created. It really is something special. It always has been.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com



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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Time invested

Towards the end of 1982, sales of the Commodore VIC-20 were in decline. As Christmas approached, outlets such as K-Mart were marking down prices on the VIC-20 to clear out shelf space for its next-gen replacement, the Commodore 64.

As the only child of a single, working mom, I had long given up hope of ever receiving an Intellivision or a ColecoVision, so it must have been some magical combination of my relentless begging, K-Mart's aggressive pricing, and Captain Kirk's commercial for the home computer of the '80s that allowed my mother to entertain the fantasy that her son might one day work with computers on a starship.

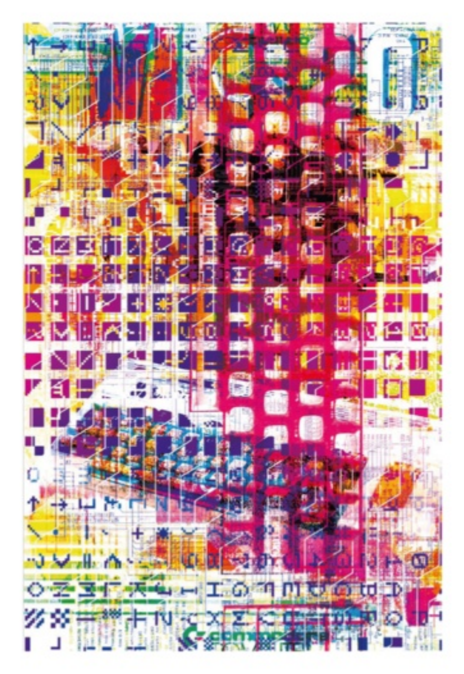
Her fantasy came half true – and so did mine. The VIC-20 could play games on cartridge, just like a console, but the selection was terrible and the cartridges were $80; half the price she'd paid for the machine itself. I only ever received one.

Fortunately, the one I got was *Lode Runner*, which is an excellent game. Even better, it included a level editor that allowed me to design my own levels and save them to cassette. Once I had exhausted the levels that shipped with the game, I began making my own content. When I tired of that, I taught myself to code in BASIC and made my own games. My first complete game was a text adventure where you were a thief who needed to get to a safe and loot it before the person in the house caught you.

Sadly, by 1984 or '85 I had all but drained the VIC-20 of its fun. Making more text adventures to play by myself offered diminishing returns and after three years of *Lode Runner*, the game had become stale. My mother could not afford to buy me another computer and eventually I stopped using my VIC-20.

My last hurrah as a gamer was spending most of 1985-86 school year playing *Ultima IV* with a friend on his Apple II. We played nearly every day after school and finished the game perhaps three times, but after that, I don't think I played another game for about seven years.

Twenty years ago, in 1993, I emerged from my own personal gaming Dark Age. The game everyone was playing was *Doom*, and while I still did not have a PC to play it on, I had several friends who did. Many of my nights were spent at friends' houses playing *Doom* while everyone else watched Aliens on VHS and got hammered. And it didn't stop with *Doom*; *Syndicate* also came out that year, and the following year *X-Com* and *TIE Fighter* both landed. The year after that was *Star Wars: Dark Forces* and *Command & Conquer*. And as the decade wore on, things just got better. *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Quake* both launched in '96, and '97 was *Jedi Knight*. Then I played the demo of *Thief* on a friend's PC and knew I had to have my own machine.



The person I am today represents the delivery of a vague promise that Captain Kirk made to my mother

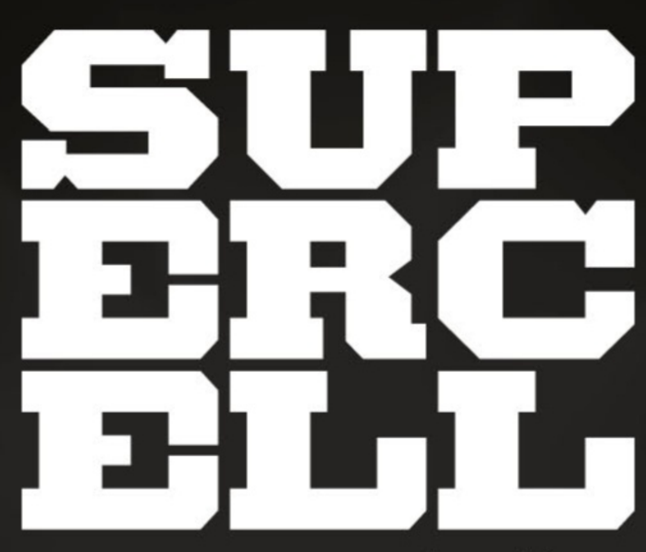
In 1998, both *Thief* and the original *Rainbow 6* turned firstperson shooters on their head by challenging the notion that shooting was the important part of the genre. I played both on my own Pentium II, 300 MHz machine with 64MB of RAM, running under Windows 97. It was on this machine that I played *Alpha Centauri*, *System Shock 2*, *Unreal* and *Unreal Tournament*. By the time *Deus Ex* shipped in 2000, my pitiful P2 couldn't keep up – and neither could my wallet.

And then something magical happened. I started leveraging the skills I had learned years before on the VIC-20. Not the BASIC coding skills or the *Lode-Runner*-specific level design skills – but rather the tenacity and determination to squeeze more fun out of the machine. I started building levels for *Unreal Tournament*, and then levels for mods. I found copies of older games – games that built a bridge back across my Dark Ages toward my childhood. I played *Dune II*, *Command & Conquer*, *Ultima V*. I played *Wolfenstein 3D* and made levels for that too.

I used the times when I was not able to consume games as entertainment to reflect upon how and why I value games in the ways I do. Before sitting down to write this column and reflect upon the past 20 years of gaming, I had assumed that the seeds of my appreciation for player expression and creative play were planted by a few key titles in the mid '90s. But now I see that, for me at least, the verbs 'play', 'create' and 'learn' all represent effectively the same concept, and that fusing these concepts is something I hope my games might do for others.

It seems to me, now, that these past 20 years of playing games, learning how to make them, and then creating them for others is an obvious, even predictable, consequence of those three years I spent with my VIC-20. In some sense, the person I am today represents the delivery of some vague and indirect promise Captain Kirk made to my mother. He suggested that a game machine is a delivery vehicle for content and that it supports the broadcast culture paradigm that separates creators from consumers. A computer, by contrast, can be used to create. And as a consequence, even in technological obsolescence, its potential value approaches infinity. A game machine will always depreciate in value, while a computer is an investment in the future.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve Software. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



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Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Assessments of character, from Mario to Kratos

I don't like Mario. I like his games – most of them – but I don't like him. He's a plumber, which means he wants to charge you £60 simply for loading his game, even if you don't play it. That increases to £80–£100 if you play late at night or at weekends.

Plus he wears dungarees. Not since Play Away have dungarees really worked. And he has an embarrassing faux-Italian accent; if he spoke like that at my local barbershop or pizzeria he'd be strung up with piano wire. And finally, he's clearly aiming too high by pursuing princesses. I'm about as fat as he is, and I know it's not worth doing any more than looking cutely hopeless in the corner of my local pub.

Sonic the Hedgehog. Sorry, but he doesn't even look like a hedgehog. And what sort of a name is 'Sonic'? It's meant to evoke velocity, but if that worked he'd be called 'SUPERsonic'. Sonic the Hedgehog? Noisy the Badly Drawn Unrealistic Blue Creature more like. Apparently he says things like 'totes amazeballs', 'dudes' and 'dudettes' in the later games. This does not endear him to me – indeed, I've deliberately punctured both eardrums with a bradawl so that I never have to hear it, even accidentally.

And those are *all* the characters I don't like. Ha, just kidding! I also hate the President's brat from *Resident Evil 4*. What was she called? (If only there was some kind of interconnected computer database we could just type questions into.) I've just remembered: Ashley Graham. The trouble is, she's too young to be useful. (Don't take that the way you're currently taking it.) Kids are rubbish dead weights in games and films… and if they're not, you know the game or film has been aimed at the rubbish dead-weight kids who play or go to see those types of games and films. (A demographic you are not part of.)

Anyway, Ashley Thingummywotsit was the whiny equivalent of cramp; an organic orthopaedic shoe that slowed you down and didn't contain guns or biological weaponry to help you in any way. I love kids (again, shut up), but I'd have happily seen her implanted with demon seed. (Really, shut up now.)

The clever thing at this juncture would be to balance this out with some characters that really



Apparently Sonic says things like 'totes amazeballs' and 'dudettes' in the later games. This does not endear him to me

work, but I've done that before – and actually laying into the characters I've paid good money to hate is far more fun. Let's be clear, though: I don't love to hate them. I hate them.

Next up is the Creature from *Black & White*. Yes, I wrote the story, script and dialogue for this game, so I'm either being deliberately shocking to stop you turning to the better contributors' pages, or I'm utterly insane. Mainly it's the first one. But the trouble with the Creature was this: the way you taught him things was organic.

There was no computery 'tell him something three times and he'll know it forever' system. He tried to please, he remembered, he forgot, he reacted to other things while trying to carry out your requests. He was like a dog, or those tiny, dribbly humans you sometimes see young ladies carrying once their beer bellies disappear.

With videogames, we're used to binary states. Tell your squad to go somewhere and they'll do it, or die trying. You are in charge. That's the beauty of games: you get to be in charge. (Something you'll never be in the real world if you play such things too often.) In games we expect our orders to be obeyed instantly, accurately and without question. (Especially in WWII titles. The irony.)

But the Creature from *Black & White* not only responded to you, but also to his inner desires and feelings, and to the world around him – just like dogs and pram-based homunculi. The only reason people put up with such erratic behaviour is because they empathise with their tiny, bootee-wearing hominoids or dogs. I utterly love my canine companion, and when she's erratic I find it endearing. In order to put up with your Creature, you must love it. I wrote 60,000 lines of text and dialogue for *Black & White*, so the love was, shall we say, tested.

GTAIV's Niko Bellic. He's nothing more than wise-cracking stubble. I hate him because I'm not him, and also because if I asked him to go for a pint he'd say no, but in a wisecracking way, and I'd feel belittled and left out and he'd drive off in a giant shabby car to murder people, leaving me to catch the last half of Bargain Hunt alone.

Blanka from *Street Fighter II*. He's got claws, an off-the-grid lethal electric attack – and he's NOT HUMAN. He's by far the best character and should tear the faces off the rest and wear them as a bumpy vest; but he's actually a grunting, self-confidence-free green ape. I had my fill of those as a schoolboy and have no desire to see their like in a 2D global best of three, thank you.

In first place – not that these are in any order; I'd need to be far more organised to attempt something like that – is that idiot Kratos from PlayStation 'fave' *God Of War*. His head is tiny, he yells incomprehensibly all the time, and he has breasts. (Don't tell me those are pecs.) If I want a shouty, tiny-headed, unintelligible person with breasts, my go-to guy is Wee Jimmy Krankie.

Next month: games that cause me to self-harm.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online


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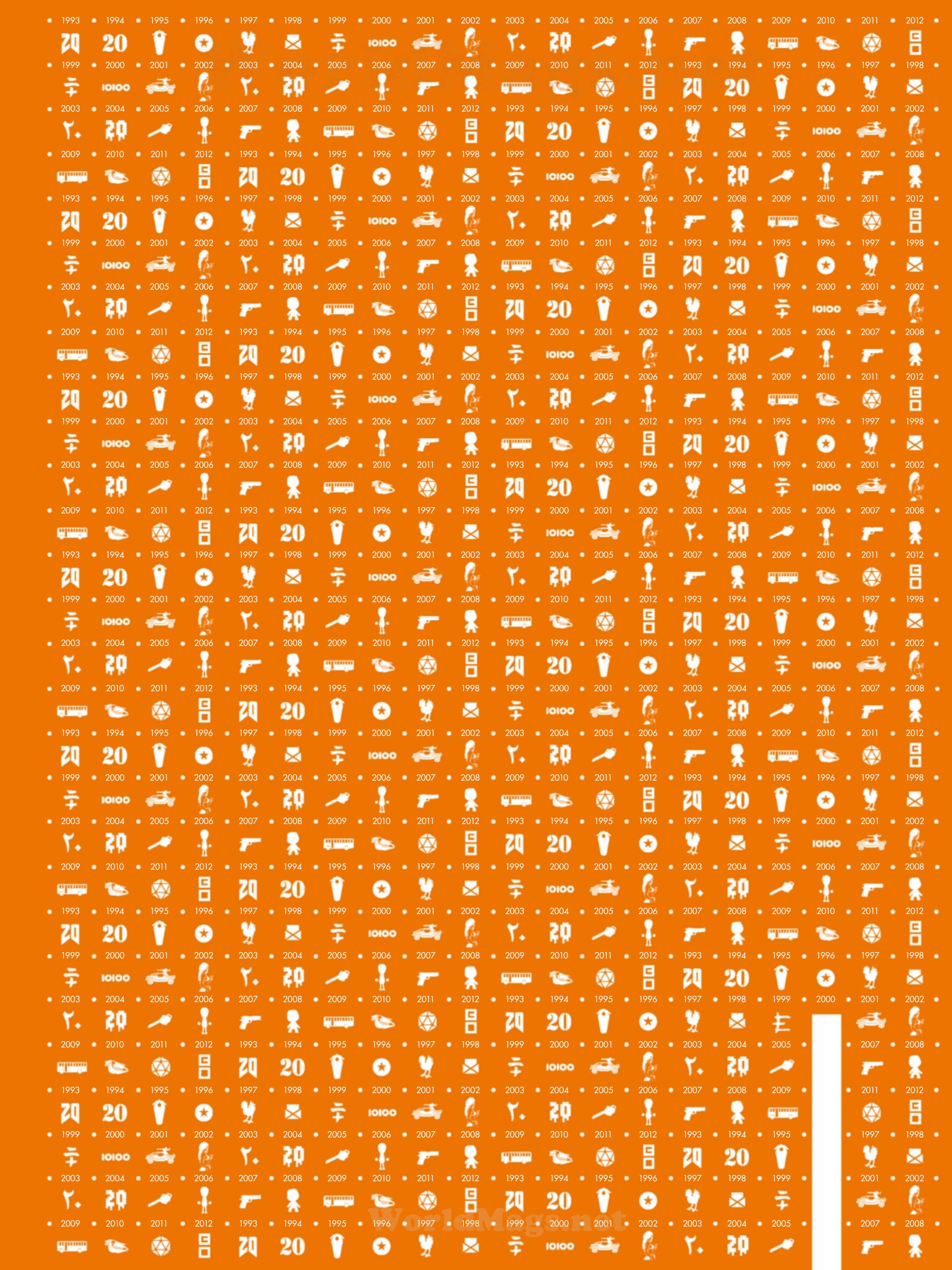

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